

My Friend's Little Sister Has It In for Me! Volume 3

mikawaghost

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My Friend's Little Sister

vol. **3**

Author:
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CONTENTS

My Friend's Little Sister Has It In for Me!

Recap

Prologue



Chapter 1:

My Friend's Little Sister Wants to Spook Me!

Chapter 2:

My Homeroom Teacher Has a Thing for Me and Bubble Tea

Interlude:

Iroha and Mashiro on the Case

Chapter 3:

My Homeroom Teacher's Boobs Have It In for Me

Chapter 4:

My Teacher's Little Sister Wants to Kill Me!

Chapter 5:

The Beach Has It In for Our Timely Arrival

Chapter 6:

My Teacher's Grandfather Is... Uh...

Chapter 7:

The Inn's Ghosts Have It In for the Guests

Interlude:

Mashiro and Canary

Chapter 8:

My Teacher Has It In for Rationality

Chapter 9:

An Age-Old Tradition Has It In for Couples!

Epilogue:

Sumire and Mashiro

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Characters



Ooboshi Akiteru

The protagonist. Second year. He is determined not to waste his teenage years in the name of absolute efficiency, and has only a single friend in light of that ideal. Though he claims to be as average as they come, he is actually the director of the 05th Floor Alliance. He often visits diners to talk business; he doesn't care much for the food.



Kohinata Iroha

First year. Ozuma's younger sister. At school, she plays the part of a cheerful, kind, and perfectly-behaved honor student, but in reality she's super energetic. She makes a point of clinging to and annoying Akiteru—and only Akiteru. A talented voice actress, she can play any character under the sun. Her favorite item to order at diners is the omurice with extra ketchup.



Tsukinomori Mashiro

Second year. Akiteru's classmate, cousin, and fake girlfriend. In real life, she treats him coldly, but on LIME she's all over him. She is secretly Makigai Namako, a hugely popular novelist. A lover of seafood, she'll order a mackerel-and-miso-soup set even at diners.



Kohinata Ozuma

A handsome second year, he's Akiteru's only friend. He has absolute trust in Akiteru. Unlike his sister, he is kind and considerate. He is the 05th Floor Alliance's genius programmer. He'll have something different every time he goes to a diner, but never spaghetti.



Kageishi Sumire

A twenty-five-year-old who's in no hurry to get married. Akiteru's homeroom teacher, she's feared as the "Venomous Queen." In truth, she's Murasaki Shikibu-sensei, a skilled illustrator who can't keep to a deadline. She loves alcohol in all its forms, and the first thing she'll order at a diner is a beer.

Recap

Relationships are unnecessary. Friends are unnecessary; well, more than one, anyway. And girlfriends are *definitely* unnecessary. The way most people spend their youth is horribly inefficient, and I decided long ago to shed everything unnecessary in order to get ahead in life. Despite all that, there I was—Ooboshi Akiteru, epitome of efficiency—with this girl who kept sneaking into my apartment.

Kohinata Iroha. She wasn't my sister, she wasn't my friend, and she definitely wasn't my girlfriend. She was nothing more than my friend's little sister.

She was annoying and a bother, and had one secret she held close to her heart: She was a hidden member of the 05th Floor Alliance, a team of developers behind a popular mobile game who were shrouded in mystery.

I was the group's producer. OZ, real name Kohinata Ozuma, was its brilliant programmer. The illustrator was Murasaki Shikibu-sensei, real name Kageishi Sumire, and our scenario writer was Makigai Namako, a best-selling light novel author who decided to join us for whatever reason. We made up the group's core of four.

Our game, *Koyagi: When They Cry*, filled a niche in the market by being a horror game which also featured charming characters. It became widely popular, attracting a huge number of players.

Kohinata Iroha was the anonymous voice actress who lent her voice to the game. Man or woman, young or old, she voiced every last character with remarkable talent. I gave her this opportunity because there was no way she could express an open interest in voice acting. I wasn't looking for anything in return; I just hated how society encouraged people to throw away their talents. I was following my belief that inefficiency and anything unnecessary should be avoided at all costs.

Like I said, I wasn't looking for anything in return, but it looked like Iroha was intent on paying me back by being as annoying as humanly possible. Letting herself into my apartment, using her assets to embarrass me, teasing me...the list goes on. Worse, it seemed she was targeting *me* specifically, which just made the whole thing even more annoying.

Life went on as normal until that transfer student, Tsukinomori Mashiro, shot her shot and turned everything on its head. She sent a

whole row of chaotic dominos tumbling when she gave me a heartfelt confession. I rejected her and told her that the Alliance was my top priority, and that any fancies of youth came after. Mashiro declared she wouldn't give up until I was in love with her, and ever since then she's tried to take the "fake" out of our "fake relationship."

And then, who do you think came crawling out of the woodwork with the most ridiculous request ever? Nobody other than our very own illustrator, Murasaki Shikibu-sensei.

"Please...marry me."

With those three words, the woman threw herself at my feet. And also she threw the lot of us into a whole new world of trouble. Why did this always have to happen to me?

Prologue

Marriage is old-fashioned and a waste of money. Living with an extra person raises your monthly expenditure, and it means you constantly have to worry about what they think and feel. You're taking on several huge responsibilities, and all you get in return is a little extra emotional security.

Even that emotional security can be taken away at the drop of a hat. Just because you're fighting, one of you starts cheating, or whatever else. If you were to call it all a massive con, that'd be putting it kindly.

Now, don't get me wrong, I don't want the human race to die out, and I get that you might think it's selfish to not marry or have kids, but you need to see the bigger picture here. Marriage is one of the least effective systems for continuing the human race.

Women's bodies are exhaustible, and a single couple won't have endless finances, so there's always a limit to how many children they can realistically birth and raise. It'd be a lot more efficient for a single rich man to go around impregnating as many women as he pleased to produce the most offspring.

Marriage is more like a luxury item. It shouldn't be seen as a necessity for producing children. If it's not necessary, then people who don't care for it (like me) shouldn't need to force themselves into it. Not that I'd ever have the chance to get married.

Or well, that's what I *used* to think.

"So anyway, I'm gonna marry Murasaki Shikibu-sensei," I told Ozu firmly.

"Uh, you maybe wanna slow things down a bit?" Ozu replied. Firmly.

It was mid-July, and Ozu and I were in an empty classroom that morning, too early for any other students to be there yet. There was a sheen of sweat on my friend's forehead. Must've been the heat, and definitely not my super serious and realistic declaration of marriage.

"Sorry, could ya say that again? Think I have wax in my ears..."

"I've decided to marry Murasaki Shikibu-sensei."

"Now say it like it's a presidential tweet."

"Marrying MurasakiShikibuSensei soon, a very fine woman. Great news!"

“Now in German.”

“Ich werde Frau Shikibu Murasaki heiraten.”

“So what you’re saying is...I gotta call a doctor.”

As he wasn’t convinced I made the decision voluntarily, Kohinata Ozuma (AKA Ozu) declared he would get a second opinion. I couldn’t have picked a better best friend. He was blessed with both great looks and a great personality, meaning he was all set for life in our society. Not only was he my only friend, but he was the Alliance’s prodigious programmer, and one of the cornerstones of our group.

He’d been through a lot to get here, but nowadays he was the super-popular protagonist of the dating sim that was his life. Well, he was too dense to actually score any dates from it. But that didn’t make me jealous at all, since I was the one who brought about this situation in the first place. That’s also not an important enough story to get into right now.

“Please don’t. You’re exaggerating!”

“Look, something’s obviously wrong with your head. Ah, I got it! Mind control!”

“You gotta cut back on the porn.”

“Hey, it’s the only explanation that makes sense. Why else would you wanna marry Murasaki Shikibu-sensei?”

“Don’t you think you’re being a little unfair to my future wife?”

“There’s nothing wrong with her personality. She’s nice enough, she’s smart, she’s good at talking *and* drawing...”

“Right? The perfect woman!”

“...But everything else about her is awful!” Ozu finished bluntly.

“Now, I get what you’re saying. She runs away from her problems, is too opinionated about anime, starts giving out Ted Talks on yaoi that no one asked for whenever she feels like it, reads too many doujinshis about young boys which is bad enough on its own except she’s also a teacher, never tidies, never keeps deadlines, is an awful drunk, is annoying, and gets mad for no reason all the time, *but...*”

“Don’t you think you’re being a little unfair to your future wife?”

“This is why it’s gonna work,” I said decisively.

Marriage is inefficient and old-fashioned. I always stuck fast to that opinion, but for the first time ever I actually wanted to get married. For the first time, I felt like it was the right thing to do: to marry Murasaki Shikibu-sensei, AKA Kageishi Sumire.

“Aki...” Ozu sighed and looked me right in the eye. “You’re serious, aren’t you?”

“Yes.”

“You’re really gonna pick Murasaki Shikibu-sensei over Iroha?”

“Yes. I don’t know what Iroha’s got to do with it, though.”

Iroha was Ozu’s little sister. To me, she was just a kouhai who

happened to be my best friend's sister. If I wasn't going to date Mashiro, who had declared her love for me and was now doubling down on her attempts to woo me, why would he think I wanted to get with Iroha?

"And, as usual, you're gonna be stubborn about it. Y'know, I was really hoping you'd end up with Iroha. But well, if you're in love with Murasaki Shikibu-sensei, guess that's that. It's your future."

"Yes. Wait, no."

"Huh?"

"What do you mean I'm 'in love' with her?"

"Well... You are, right?"

"Of course not."

"What? But you keep going on about marrying her."

"You're jumping to conclusions. This isn't going to be an ordinary marriage."

"Oh. Great!"

The sudden relief on his face was a sure sign I wasn't clear enough before. I decided to explain myself.

"There's no way I could marry Murasaki Shikibu-sensei for love, right? Obviously I'm just marrying her for her body."

"Great! Wait, not great."

I thought I was making perfect sense this time, but apparently not. At this rate, we were going to be here all day. It would be quicker just to start explaining things from the very beginning. Maybe I did come out of left field. Any third party reading this might have been just as confused.

"All right, Ozu. I'll start from the beginning. It all began on the evening of the drama fair..."

"Please...marry me," Murasaki Shikibu-sensei asked on her hands and knees.

I heard a plate smash behind me.

"Wh-What did she just say?"

"Sumire-chan-sensei?"

Mashiro and Iroha gasped behind me.

You guys better pay me back for that plate.

"I know it's a shock, Akiteru-sama! But please let me explain," Sumire began, a grave expression on her face.

I held up a hand to cut her off. "No need."

"What?"

"I think I can guess what happened."

I was someone who kept on learning, and I was pretty clued in to what was going on around me. This was clearly one of those run-of-

the-mill romantic comedy problems! For a while now, everything in my life had seemed like one big clichéd development after another, each one laughing in the face of reality.

My fake girlfriend. Her confession. Her stubbornness. A drama club full of girls asking for my help. Both leads in the play being unable to perform, forcing Iroha and me to take their places. Statistically, all of these were close to impossible events, but at this point something normal happening to me would be much stranger.

There had to be some kind of weird anomaly messing with my life. One that insisted on putting me through the usual fare for the protagonist of a romcom series. The sort that'd be on its third volume by now. Maybe agreeing to fake-date Mashiro had been the trigger. I'd stumbled into a strange parallel world.

Why should I be surprised by my homeroom teacher proposing marriage?

"Let me guess. You're gonna pitch me a perfect H-game scenario."

"That's not funny! I'm serious, and this is really happening!"

"Maybe I'll write this down and we could put it in *Koyagi*."

"Why won't you *listen*?!" Sumire scowled at me as she clung to me. "Why don't *you* tell me what happened then, Mr. Know-It-All?!"

"I'll give it a try."

"Go on, then!"

"I will!"

"Do it!"

"Your parents arranged a marriage for you, but you hate the guy. So you wanna tell your folks you're already marrying someone, just so you don't have to marry *their* choice."

"My parents set me up with some guy I hate, and I wanna tell 'em I'm already marrying someone else so it doesn't go through!"

There was a pause.

"Wait. I was right?"

"How did you *knooooow*?! Do you have psychic powers? Are you telepathic?!" Sumire wailed, her eyes wide.

I really wasn't surprised at this point.

"It's a cliché. That's how I knew."

"Don't talk about it like it's some stupid novel! This is my life! And it's ruined!"

"Yeah, yeah..."

I studied Sumire from the top of her trembling head to the tip of her toes. It was hard to tell when she was in Murasaki Shikibu-sensei mode, what with her plain jersey and glasses, but...

She had a good body. Her chest was large but not saggy, and her figure rivaled any model's. Both her youthful energy and her mature sexiness made her attractive on multiple levels. She was totally a

looker when she was in teacher mode. Subtle make-up, well-dressed, not even a harsh glare or distant words could hide that. She could probably ask any guy out, and ninety percent'd agree in a heartbeat.

"Listen, Sumire-sensei, you're only twenty-five, right? It's not unusual these days to be single at that age. Plus, you're plenty good-looking, so I don't think there's any ru—" I squealed as each side of my stomach was pinched.

"What's the matter, Senpai?"

I turned to find Iroha grinning at me and Mashiro avoiding my gaze. If I wasn't mistaken, they were several feet closer to me than before, and well within pinching-distance. I decided to ignore them and focus on Sumire.

"I don't think there's any rush," I repeated. "You can probably find tons of men who'd want to marry you."

"I know twenty-five is still young in most cases, but my family's different!"

"Different how?"

"They live deep in the mountains, secluded from the modern world. They haven't really caught up with this era yet..." Sumire's gaze turned wistful. "They're still so old-fashioned about a lot of things. I guess you'd call it 'traditional.' Or maybe 'out of touch'..."

"In other words, they think the younger you get married, the better."

"Bingo. I've been keeping them back for years by saying I want to focus on my career, but they're starting to put their foot down..."

"Sumire-sensei..."

Her face was drained of all color, and her head flopped in despair. I frowned uneasily. She was always the most lively of the Alliance, so it was easy to forget, but she was one of us too. Sumire was also a victim of her family not allowing her to pursue her real dreams.

It took a long time to persuade her to lend us her talents after I met her that one summer, and it was only through that process that I discovered the true feelings lurking behind her carefree mask. Sumire constantly had to hide who she truly was, and I could only imagine how absolute her parents' traditions must have been. The look on her trembling face right now told a clear story.

"And that's why you proposed to me. Because if I marry you, you won't have to marry whoever your parents picked out for you."

"Yes! That's right! I don't wanna get married yet! I already know who I want to dedicate my life to!"

I heard Mashiro gasp behind me. The next thing I knew, a small hand was tugging on the hem of my shirt.

"I don't like this," a quiet voice whispered in my ear. "Sumire-sensei's trying to get with you!"

“Don’t be silly, Mashiro. There’s no way—”

“You’ll have to be her fake fiancé! That’s getting too close... Even if she doesn’t like you now, a fake relationship like that can change the way she sees you.”

“Come on, remember who we’re talking about here! That’s impossi...bluh?”

A quiet voice in the back of my mind told me that I had a pretty bad track record of determining what was impossible. Best ignore it. I turned back to Sumire.

“There’s already someone you want to ‘dedicate’ your life to? I didn’t know you were crushing on anyone.”

“Huh? O-Oh, um, yeah...” Sumire looked away and squirmed, her cheeks reddening.

Was she twenty-five or twelve? I wondered if her crush might be fictional, but the way she spoke about her favorite characters didn’t quite give me the impression she was in love with any of them.

“So you *do* have a crush? On someone who actually exists?”

“Oh, this is embarrassing... I’ve never told you guys...” Sumire wouldn’t stop glancing at me, and the pink tinge under her glasses showed no signs of fading.

Sumire was more into shipping than waifus and husbandos. If she saw any traits she admired in a character, she’d rather pair them with someone else than claim them for herself. Even when she was at the peak of hype over a certain character, she’d never hog a character and instead shipped ’em with others.

But now here she was claiming she had a crush on somebody. I wasn’t the only one equal parts curious and terrified to see what she was about to say. Iroha and Mashiro were holding their breath behind me.

“I like...Arashima-kun from...*Mechanical Pencil Jin-kun*...”

“Okay.”

“I’ll tidy up that plate, Mashiro-senpai. Be careful not to step on any pieces, okay?”

“I’ll help. Where’s the dustpan and broom?”

“Don’t ignore meeeeeeeee!” Sumire tried to grab all three of us at once, but Iroha and Mashiro slipped away from her hold, leaving her clinging to me with tears and snot running down her face.

She deserved it. *Mechanical Pencil Jin-kun* was a children’s anime that ran on a Friday night and was popular among all ages. It was a comedy anime about a bunch of mischievous preschoolers, and Arashima-kun always got into arguments with Jin-kun, the main character. He had good looks, was a bit of an airhead sometimes, and he was also a tsundere. But yeah, most of all, he was a preschooler.

“I should’ve known better than to take you seriously. Now leave

me alone.”

“Wait! This really *is* serious, I swear!”

“Shut up! It’s your fault for admitting you have a crush on a fictional preschooler. How the heck am I supposed to take you seriously after that?”

“What are you talking about? He’s the perfect shota! Cheeky *and* tsundere!”

“Are you even listening to yourself right now? You’re a teacher!”

“Look, if I get married, I’ll lose all my free time. You know that wives just end up like slaves, right? I’ll have to do all the chores, raise the kids, and then be stolen away by my father-in-law, my husband’s coworkers, and the hot guy from next door to be violated. They’ll record everything and send it to my husband later!”

“That’s never gonna happen. Snap out of those manga-induced delusions.”

“All I’m saying is that I don’t wanna get married yet! Just pretend to be my fiancé for a bit, okay? I promise it’ll all be pretend! I don’t wanna have to touch you or anything either, you know!”

“Now you’re making me mad,” I said.

I felt the same way about her, of course, but it still hurt.

“Okay, okay, I’m sorry! I know you’ve got zero experience whatsoever, but I need you to be my fiancé.”

“You didn’t have to point that out. Anyway, how is this even gonna work?”

“It’s simple!” Sumire puffed out her large chest proudly and grinned at me. “Akiteru-sama. How old are you right now?”

“Huh? I’m sixteen.”

“Right? So in other words, I’m way out of your league.”

“Shoulders or back? Your choice.”

“W-Wait. Lemme finish before you start targeting my pressure points! And stop cracking your knuckles!”

“Well, hurry up and get to the point then, or I’m gonna lose my patience!”

“Okay, I get it! So, you’re sixteen. You’re not allowed to get married for another two years.”

“Ah, I see.”

If Sumire’s family were as strict as they sounded, then they would probably pressure her to marry any fiancé she introduced to them as soon as possible. If she introduced them to somebody who legally *couldn’t* get married, that wouldn’t be an issue.

“I get you. But there are still a ton of problems.”

“Like what?”

“Your family are all teachers. Are you really gonna go up to them and say ‘Hey, I’m dating one of my students?’”

“Not a problem! They take education seriously, but they wouldn’t deny true love just because we’re teacher and student.”

“That’s, uh, pretty open-minded of them.”

That was the politest way I could put it, anyway.

“It wouldn’t be the first time, so no one’ll report it either.”

“What?!”

So she was saying there was already one teacher (or more?) in her family who married their student? I could only pray they taught at a high school and nothing younger.

“Still, this isn’t a solution. This entire song and dance’ll just repeat in two years’ time.”

“I know that. I just want to deal with the here and now! Let future-me worry about future problems.”

“So this is why you can’t keep deadlines.”

“Happiness is all that matters. I might even get married someday, but *not* to the person my parents picked out for me!” Sumire said determinedly. “If I marry their choice, I’ll have to be the same Sumire to my husband as I am to my family. I won’t be able to be my true self, Murasaki Shikibu-sensei. It’s gonna be torture, having to wear a mask every waking moment of my life!”

“Why don’t you just tell him after the wedding? ‘By the way, I’m actually a massive weirdo!’” Iroha asked, broom now in hand.

“I can’t. He thinks he’s getting a sophisticated beauty, and then I show him the real me? It’d be bait-and-switch! What if he takes me to court? Then my family will definitely find out!”

“At least you know you’re trash.” I was impressed at her self-awareness.

“I understand how you feel, though...” Mashiro spoke up in a small voice. She was clutching the dustpan to her chest and peered out from behind Iroha’s back. “I want to be completely honest with the man I marry. ...Right, Aki?”

“Why’re you asking me?”

“I think you know why...” Mashiro looked at me tenderly with a soft, bashful smile.

“Well, yeah, but...” I couldn’t look her in the eye.

Tsukinomori Mashiro. The 05th Floor Alliance was looking to find employment at Honeyplace Works. Its CEO said he would gladly have us, but I had to be Mashiro’s fake boyfriend until we graduated high school. She was the CEO’s daughter and my cousin. Oh, I forgot to mention something. Our relationship was supposed to be fake, but somewhere along the line she fell in love with me.

Although I rejected her, that hasn’t stopped her from doubling down on her role and stubbornly trying to get me to fall for her.

Mashiro was staring at me steadily. Everything seemed to be

progressing in slow motion. I was really starting to get tired of the instincts and urges that came packaged with puberty. I knew I didn't have any feelings for Mashiro, but when she (or any cute girl for that matter) stared at me with such sultry eyes, my heart began to pound in what was undeniably excitement. If she kept this up, maybe I really *would* fall for her.

Fortunately, she couldn't.

"O-Okay, I'm done. I-Iroha-chan, let's tidy up that plate."

"Huh? Oh, right! Okay!"

Mashiro couldn't keep up her alluring act for more than three—wait, scratch that—one minute before she got too embarrassed to continue and had to run away. It was in part due to her naturally shy nature, but either way, it saved me a ton of trouble.

I sighed and looked back at Sumire. "Honestly, I get where you're coming from when you say you want to be honest with your husband, Sumire-sensei."

"You do?! Does that mean you'll do it?!"

"Sure. I'll be your fake fiancé." Just then, a very clear, prophetic image flashed through my mind. "Wait a sec..."

Sumire mentioned that a wife was often nothing more than a slave, and so marriage would deprive her of her spare time. Did that mean she was one of those people who believed a wife had to do whatever her husband asked of her? Because that would make things a whole lot easier...

"Maybe marrying you wouldn't be so bad after all."

"Huh?"

"Yeah. I mean, if we really did end up marrying after all this, I don't think I'd mind too much."

Crash!

The fragments of plate that Mashiro and Iroha had so carefully brushed into the pan fell to the floor once again.

"*Senpai?*! What the heck are you saying?!"

"Wait a second, Aki. Being her fake fiancé should already be a stretch for you, but..."

"But nothing. Think about it. If a wife has to do what her husband says, then if we get married, I'll have an endless stream of illustrations all done within the deadline. All we have to do is sign a piece of paper, and I'll never have to worry about badgering her again!"

I could feel three pairs of eyes staring at me like I was crazy. Iroha's gaze in particular ticked me off. As if she had the right to judge anyone's sanity.

"I mean, when you put it like that... I won't have to come up with a plan B for when my family gets on my back again, so works for me. That doesn't mean I'm gonna let you work me into the ground for

those drawings, but being able to fool my family in exchange is a pretty juicy deal.”

“Hold it right there, Sumire-chan-sensei! I think you need to seriously reconsider! Senpai’s a brute! A total wifebeater! You don’t wanna sign any contract with him if you can help it! Think about the most hardcore hentai manga you’ve ever read, ’cause that’s about as bad as he’ll be!”

Too much information, Iroha.

“Sh-She’s right, Sensei! Aki’s a virgin who has no idea how to treat a lady! You two will be divorced within a week!”

What had these two heard about me that I didn’t know? It was true I had no experience, but that didn’t mean I was doomed to fail. Right?

“Come on, girls, I know who I’m dealing with. I make him madder than anyone! I know what happens when you get on his bad side.” Sumire flashed Iroha and Mashiro a confident smile. “But he’s still better than some random guy older than eighteen! And—eep! Stop pinching me, you two!”

“Sorry, Sumire-chan-sensei, but I can’t just stand here and let you badmouth Senpai like that!”

“Yeah, you really need to lighten up!” Mashiro added, continuing to pinch Sumire’s side.

“Q-Quit it! That tickles! Stop! I’m sensitive there! Noooo!”

They kept tickling her until Sumire was writhing on the floor in agonizing fits of giggles.

I sighed at the strangely endearing scene.

“At least you guys have something to laugh about...”

“Anyway, that’s what happened.”

“Don’t sweat it, Aki. Now you have something to laugh about too!”

Chapter 1: My Friend's Little Sister Wants to Spook Me!

Sumire: Thank you for the wonderful evening last night.

AKI: Think before you send a message that can be misinterpreted.

Sumire: One night of passion, and you think you're king of the bedroom? Funny, since I was totally dominating you last night.

Sumire: We're in a serious relationship now, you know. I need to make sure you can take it.

Sumire: I can picture it now. We go out to buy me a swimsuit, and you're so excited that you're panting like a dog.

Sumire: Hello?

System: Your message could not be delivered to the recipient.

OZ: Murasaki Shikibu-sensei just sent me this:

OZ: HELP! AKI BLOCKED ME!

AKI: Ugh. Sorry for the trouble.

AKI: Send me any more harassment, and I'm sending screenshots to the cops.

Sumire: It's not harassment! I'm trying to talk to you like we're a real couple!

Sumire: I was gonna send the screenshots to my family to show them how in love we are!

Sumire: With these receipts, they'll never know we're just pretending!

AKI: So that's why you're not messaging me from your Murasaki Shikibu-sensei account?

Sumire: You got it. This is the account I use with my family.

AKI: Just don't do anything stupid, okay? You go too far with this and we're gonna have a ton of extra hoops to jump through.

Sumire: Don't worry! I got this! Just reply to me

like we're all over each other!

I was exchanging an endless, troublesome stream of LIME messages with Sumire after school that day. As usual, I was taking the shortest and quickest route home. It was that gross humid time between the rainy season and midsummer. The sun was scorching, and an uncomfortable sweat was clinging to my skin. Sumire's constant sexual harassment and tiresome pleading just made it all the more depressing.

I know what I said about marrying her in exchange for quicker drawings, but if I had to keep sending flirty messages just to keep up the pretense, maybe it was more trouble than it was worth. It wasn't just texts either. Sumire and I were going swimsuit shopping after this as part of the whole charade. Summer vacation started in two days, and Sumire was promising me a wonderful series of dates where we'd take the loveliest pictures together.

So by the time I reached my apartment building, I was already knee-deep in despair.

My phone vibrated yet again. I wanted to set it to mute, but then I realized it wasn't Sumire this time.

Mashiro: Let's have lots of fun during summer vacation ♡

Mashiro: Just be careful of heat stroke, okay? Drink lots, but make sure you have enough salt too.

Mashiro: And get plenty of sleep, even though it's yucky and hot! I want you to take care of yourself ♡

Are you supposed to be my girlfriend or my wife? Or even my mother?

Mashiro's onslaught of smothering messages was just making me more depressed. Ever since I rejected her, she really was taking the girlfriend thing way too seriously. I mean, sure, I was a guy just like any other. Having an objectively beautiful girl like her sending me messages like this made me *kind of* happy. I just couldn't afford to get carried away right now; there was too much stuff I had to do.

I was fully focused on my one goal in life at the moment: to get every member of the 05th Floor Alliance, which created the mobile game *Koyagi: When They Cry*, an unconditional job offer at Honeyplace Works. Each member, whether because of their household, personality, or environment, was currently unable to make full use of their talent. I was going to get them a job at one of the largest companies in the industry to make sure that talent didn't go to waste.

I would do anything to make that happen in the quickest and most

efficient way. That was why I couldn't afford to get sidetracked by the temporary pleasures that youth and high school threw my way.

I sent Mashiro a quick reply along the lines of "will do" before heading into my apartment, room 502.

"Huh?"

There was a familiar pair of loafers in the entranceway, but they weren't mine.

"She's here *again*?"

The stifling weather already put me in a bad mood and now I had to deal with a stifling personality too. Everyone around me loved to do whatever the hell they wanted without a thought for others. And by others, I mean me.

Whatever. I just wanted to have a shower and change out of my uniform into something cooler. If she was here already, she probably switched on the air conditioner in my room, which I guess was something. I pulled off my shoes and headed to my bedroom. I turned the knob.

"Huh? It's locked?"

"Oh, Senpai! Is that you?" an overly-innocent voice asked from the other side of the door.

So it *was* her. I couldn't say I was surprised. Everyone else I knew was too polite for this kind of ruffian behavior. It was, of course, Ozu's younger sister, and the phantom member of the 05th Floor Alliance. Every now and again she made me pause and think that maybe, just maybe, there was an inkling of goodness inside her. Deep, deep inside her. But mostly, she was the dictionary definition of troublesome.

Ladies and gentlemen, my friend's little sister, Kohinata Iroha.

"Open the door."

"Just gimme half a sec, okay?! I'm getting changed!"

"In someone else's room?"

"Why does it matter? Y'know that having a high school girl gettin' changed in your room makes it, like, twice as valuable? I'm doing this for you!"

"That makes zero sense. You should've just gotten changed at your place before coming over."

"What? There's no way I could walk down the corridor like this! Unless that's exactly what you want, you perv!"

"What are you talking about? What the hell are you wearing?!"

If it wasn't something she could be seen in public wearing, then this could get dangerous.

"Duh! It's summer! Whaddya *think*?"

"Just tell me!"

"You know! They just came out with the new one, so I thought I'd try it!"

“New what?!”

Honestly, I knew exactly what she was talking about. I could already picture it.

A golden beach. The sun beating down on a scene of gentle waves, and shrill laughter riding on the wind. Iroha, running towards me and waving, leaving small footprints in the sand behind her. The other visitors to the beach, male and female alike, staring at her beautiful skin, only a small part of it hidden by her bikini.

The thin material of her bikini top doing all it could to hold her round boobs, and her long, smooth legs topped with what was barely thicker than a string. She was like a mermaid with legs come to life, or even—actually what was I picturing? This wasn’t the time for delusions!

It really isn’t normal to put on a bikini in someone else’s house, right?

As a bastion of justice and purity, and a man with a heart of steel, I managed to cut my imagination off mid-vision, and now I was done having any kinky thoughts. I hoped she counted herself lucky, because I’ve seen women try this stuff in a certain flavor of manga and get jumped on in the second panel.

“I’m done! You can come in now!”

Finally, permission to go into my own room. I heard the door unlock from the other side. Gulp. All I needed to do was open the door and step inside. Just a moment ago, this door was like a slab of iron, but suddenly it seemed thin as paper. If I opened the door now, I’d see Iroha there in her swimsuit. I wasn’t sure I could handle it.

Hold on a second. Why was I worrying so much about the boiling hot living room, the sticky sweat clinging to my uniform, or how I wanted to change into something clean? I totally could’ve just switched on the air conditioner in the living room! That’d make everything more bearable. I didn’t have to play her games.

Hold on again! This was *my* room!

I knew just what to do. I’d close my eyes, ignore Iroha in whatever state she was in, take the shortest route to the closet, grab a towel and a change of clothes, then leave and go take a nice bath. Easy. I took a deep breath and opened the door.

“Revenge...”

“Gah!”

Wh-What was that?!

The moment I opened the door, a girl in a white robe barreled into my chest. The cool air in the room made my skin prickle. There was a strange clattering noise as the girl on my chest looked up at me. It was only now that I noticed the triangle of white paper plastered to her forehead. Her face was pale and her eyes were sunken in. Crimson

blood dribbled from her mouth.

This zombie was clinging to my chest. A shiver raced up my spine. In a few seconds, her curse would kill me. I saw my life, memories, and regrets flashing before my eyes. How did this happen? Wasn't there supposed to be a hot babe in a bikini on the other side of my door?

If only I'd lived a more efficient life, I found myself wishing, and had time to experience even more.

I always wanted to travel. To play the games I told myself were a waste of time, and to watch those movies that caught my interest. I would never get to see how this season's anime would end, nor play the remake of that game I loved so much in elementary school.

More than anything else, I wish I could've gotten at least ten more drawings out of Murasaki Shikibu-sensei. Then the team would have everything they needed to see Makigai Namako-sensei's fifth scenario through to the end, and even without me, maybe they could finish... Is it just me, or is this inner monologue going on a bit too long? Why aren't I dead yet?

I cautiously opened my eyes. I realized the hands on my chest were warm.

"Oh my God! You were seriously terrified, weren't you? That's adorable!" The ghost spluttered with laughter.

"Wait, Iroha?!"



“You got it! I’m glad you’re such a fan of Sadako! You oughta go see the new movie that came out! Look! You’re even moved to tears!”

“I am *not* crying!”

“C’mon, no need to be shy! Boys are cute when they cry! And I’m the only one who gets to see you like this! Hnnngh! I can’t bear it!” She guffawed and began to thump my chest. Yup, this was definitely Iroha and not a ghost. Even a poltergeist wouldn’t be this unbearably annoying. “We even talked before you opened the door. You should’ve known it was me! But you still crapped yourself! Looks like I win this round!”

“D-Dammit...”

I had no words. I knew Iroha was in there before I opened the door, and I still ended up saying my final prayers when I actually saw her.

“It was that stupid voice you did! It’s unfair how realistic it sounds!”

“What?” Iroha put one hand on my shoulder and stood up straight. “***You mean this voice?***”

“Nnrk! D-Don’t whisper in my ear like that! Stay away from me!”

“Guess I found another weakness to add to the list!” Iroha grinned.

“It’s too creepy, even when I know it’s you. You really can play anything, can’t you?”

“Oh, I have a whole range for a ton of different situations. I was kinda mad I couldn’t do a decent scary voice without Otoi-san having to put some effect on it. So I practiced as much as I could in secret, ’cause I knew something like this’d make you shit bricks!”

“I admire your diligence, but I’m sure you have a better use for—”

I love you, Senpai!

“I said quit it!” I shoved her away from me.

“The madder you get, the more fun it is!” Iroha put up a white sleeve to her mouth and giggled.

Even through her perfect spectral make-up, the cheekiness of that grin shone through loud and clear. Right now she looked more like a friendly ghost than anything that was supposed to be scary. Also, did this mean she did that make-up by herself just to spook me? What a waste of talent.

“Look, your claims were misleading. When you say ‘summer,’ ghosts are like, the third thing I think of. You totally got my hopes up for nothing!”

“Oooh?” Iroha’s grin widened.

“Wh-What?”

“I ‘got your hopes up,’ huh?”

"I didn't say that."

"*You totally got my hopes up for nothing!*"

"Why the heck were you recording?!"

"Cause I know from experience it's the best way to bully you!"

the ghost declared, waving the phone up in the air.

Sometimes I wish modern life wasn't so convenient.

By some miracle, I managed to suppress the urge to sock her.

"So maybe I did say it. So what?"

"What were you hoping for? Did you wanna see me in a super-revealing swimsuit or something, huh?"

"D-Don't be stupid. Who'd wanna see *you* in a swimsuit? You're just a kid."

"I dunno if I buy it." Iroha smirked. "What were you hoping for then?"

"Who cares? Shut up."

"Sure, I guess no one does care. Welp, that means I'll pick the answer I like best. I'll forever cherish this memory. Your disappointment 'cause I wasn't in a bikini, and then how you got so super duper flustered over it... And I'll never forget your pathetic look when you tried hiding it afterwards!"

"Ngh..."

"You can be honest, you know? Admit you hoped to see me in a swimsuit. Do that, and I'll keep remembering you as the adorable Senpai you are." Iroha sidled up to me and began to trace a line down my chest.

I was so mad, it didn't even feel ticklish. She was trying to sully my good name! I guess being honest with her here was better than being labeled a pervert in her mind for all eternity...

"Fine. I was hoping you'd be in a swimsuit," I admitted, my fists trembling.

"Oh?" Iroha said sweetly. "So you admit it? You wanted to see me in a swimsuit!"

"No, not quite!"

"Huh?"

"I wanted you to be in a swimsuit for reference purposes!"

"What?!"

I thrust my finger in Iroha's confused face. "I wanted to run a limited event for *Koyagi*, since it's summer, and for that I needed Murasaki Shikibu-sensei to draw me three pictures of our characters in swimsuits! She works at least twice as fast when she has a real-life reference! I was hoping you'd be in a swimsuit, so that I could take you straight to Murasaki Shikibu-sensei's place to be drawn!"

I came up with that on the spot, of course, and it was full of holes, but it was all I could do for now. It was way better than giving in and

admitting I thought she was a hot babe!

“Ugh. At least gimme *something* I can argue with. Something that would contradict your personality and obsession with efficiency.”

“My comeback was flawless. Time for you to shut up and take the loss!”

Iroha’s only reaction was to pout. Guess I got her this time.

She pointedly looked away from me. “I-It’s not like I care, anyway! I mean, it’s summer vacation in a couple of days! There’ll be tons of chances for me to mess with you! I’ll be able to hang out in your room every single day!”

“Every day?!”

“Of course! There are a ton of manga I wanna read, and a ton of games I wanna play!”

“Eh, I can’t really refuse you, then.”

It was all to do with her home life. All forms of entertainment and anything relating to show business were banned in the Kohinata household, and it was all because of their mother, Otoha-san. Neither Ozu nor Iroha knew why, and it also meant that Iroha had no electronics other than her phone. No game consoles, no TV, no computer, no mp3 player...nothing.

At most, Ozu was allowed a computer to practice his programming on, but he wasn’t allowed to access anything entertainment-related on it. If Iroha wanted to do anything fun at all, she would hang out in my room.

“Lookin’ forward to a long summer with you, Senpai!” Iroha promptly threw herself onto my bed and began to loll around.

“Look, I’m not saying you can’t come over, but does it really have to be every single day? Don’t you have homework to do?”

“Sure I do! And I’ll just do it here!”

“Why? At least leave your studying at home. It’s not like you have any entertainment to distract you there.”

“Um, I’m not stupid! I’m gonna do it here because of you! You’re my senpai!”

“So?”

“You did all the same homework a year ago, right? You can just tell me the answers and then it’ll be done! The teacher’ll be like, ‘Oh, Iroha-san, your homework is perfect as always! You sure you didn’t come here from some parallel world and have a ton of meta knowledge?’ And then I’ll be like, ‘Sorry, I have no idea what you’re talking about!’ because I was so busy studying I don’t have time to read that kinda stuff, you know?”

“You just love having the whole world wrapped around your little finger, huh? But I gotta admit, that does sound like the most efficient option.”

In my opinion, summer homework never had anything to do with the exams we took. It was best just to get it done as soon as possible (properly or half-assedly, however you wanted), and then move on and use your time for something more valuable. Iroha's grades were great. In fact, I heard she was top of her year. Even if she cheated on her homework, I doubted that would change.

"It's totally efficient, right? So—"

"So nothing." I poked her in the forehead as she looked up expectantly at me.

"You won't help? Why not?!"

"Hey, I used up my precious time for *my* homework. It kinda pisses me off to think about you mooching off my hard work."

"Um, ever heard of *generosity*, Senpai?"

"Oh, come on! I'd have to give up my time again to teach you! There's literally nothing in it for me."

"Whaddya mean 'nothing'? You get to spend every day flirting with a hot girl like me!"

"I think the term you're looking for is 'pest.' Now get outta here! Come on!"

"H-Hey, quit it! Why do I hafta leave?!"

I rolled Iroha up in the sheets and towards the door.

"I wanna get changed. Get out."

"No! The living room's too hot!"

"Turn on the A/C, then!"

"It'll take too long to cool down! You don't even hafta get changed! Who cares if you're sweaty in your own apartment?"

"I don't care if it's my place, I don't wanna stink. And I doubt you'd wanna smell it either."

"What? You're *that* self-conscious about it?" Iroha crawled out from the bundle of sheets and towards me before sniffing at my uniform.

"Stop being a weirdo."

"I'm just sayin', you don't really smell that bad."

"Wait. Don't tell me you're into that kinda thing?"

"Always assuming the worst, huh? I get my fair share of stink from classmates after gym, or just the bad ones during class, so I know what I'm sniffin' for," Iroha said with a sigh.

She was right though; part of being a teenager meant smelling all kinds of people at school. I probably stank a little bit, but maybe not as much as some of the other people she came across on a daily basis. Not enough to put her off, anyway.

"Even if you don't care, I care. I don't wanna spend the rest of the day in this sweaty uniform either. Not when I have plans."

"Plans?"

"I'm going on a date with Sumire-sensei. Swimsuit shopping."

"What?! You didn't tell me!"

"Why would I?"

I brushed Iroha out of my way while she continued whining, and checked the time. It was five. Sumire finished her business at school at six, so we were due to meet at the mall at half past six.

"But you guys aren't actually engaged, right?"

"Of course we aren't. I wouldn't date someone like her in a million years!"

"So what's the point of goin' on dates?"

"We're trying to convince her family as best we can. Y'know, send them a couple photos of us having a great time. Trust me, I'm not happy about it either."

I already said I'd be her fake fiancé, though, so I might as well go along with this kind of stuff too.

"Huh. Makes sense, I guess. *But!*" Iroha broke into a grin. She stretched out her arms wide and stood in front of my bedroom door, blocking me off. "There's no way I'm gonna let you pass now!"

"What?"

"You can't go on a date if you still stink like that, right? And if you can't go on the date, you'll be in trouble! Which means it's my job to get in your way! Good luck changing or having a shower on my watch!"

"Talk about having a few screws loose..."

"Kabaddi, kabaddi!" Iroha laughed, blocking my way.

I sighed and looked up at the ceiling. Why couldn't I meet a normal girl for once?

Getting rid of Iroha wasn't all that difficult. I turned off the air conditioner until the bedroom was boiling hot, and then she ran away of her own accord. Finally free, I took that shower I'd been longing for and put on a fresh change of clothes.

"Ozu, I can feel that stupid grin on your face. What's up?"

"Mind if I ask something, Aki?"

"Go ahead."

"Why're you two always flirting so much?"



Seafood and Tomato Salad (2)



...



Iroha

Bang bang! Court is now in session! The defendant, Senpai, is accused of going swimsuit shopping!



Mashiro

What happened?



Iroha

Senpai said he's going swimsuit shopping with Sumire-chan-sensei right now!



Mashiro

What?



Iroha

We can't let him get away with this delinquency!



Iroha

Judge Mashiro, please give your verdict!



Mashiro

Screw him.



Iroha

The prosecution rests!



Mashiro

It doesn't make sense. Aren't they just pretending?



Iroha

Yeah! Ikr!



Mashiro

But they're really going shopping?



Seafood and Tomato Salad (2)



...



Iroha

Yep!



Mashiro

Screw him.



Iroha

Double death penalty!



Iroha

Wanna go get some decisive evidence?



Mashiro

Wanna go...where?



Iroha

Ace Detective time!



Mashiro

Ah. I get it!



Iroha

Get ready as quick as you can! We'll meet in the hallway!



Mashiro

Okay! Just give me a second!



Iroha

Let's keep a close watch on sneaky Senpai and his womanizing ways!



Mashiro

Um, yeah!

Chapter 2: My Homeroom Teacher Has a Thing for Me and Bubble Tea

“This thing never stops looking annoying.”

I was waiting for Sumire by the Vengeful Owl statue at the entrance of the mall. The owl looked down on everyone with a stupid look on its face. Just one look at it would sour anyone’s day.

It was half past six, the perfect time. Too early for employed people to start shopping, but too late for students who stopped by here on the way home. There were no crowds at all, and if there was one thing I hated for its inefficiency, it was throngs of people getting in my way. There was nothing worse than being stuck in those crowds in the heat of summer too.

I first met Sumire in the midsummer. I was melting from the heat, surrounded by a crowd of con-goers. But the stalls were full of talented potential targets for the Alliance’s illustrator position. If I hadn’t been so sure of that, I’d have turned around and left back then.

The familiar LIME jingle came from my pocket.

Mashiro: I heard you’re going on a date with Sumire-sensei. Don’t worry! I trust you!

Huh? If she trusted me that much, why say it? I replied with a noncommittal sticker. Whenever I didn’t know what to say, I’d go with a random sticker like that one. God bless whoever invented them.

As I waited, a large four-by-four drove past and turned into the parking lot.

“There she is.”

My teacher was in the driver’s seat, bobbing her head to music I couldn’t hear. That was Sumire, by the way. She was totally singing along to some anime OP in there. She was experienced enough not to have it on so loud that it was audible outside the car, but it was like she forgot the windows were transparent. If any of her students saw her, the Venomous Queen would be dethroned in the blink of an eye.

After a few moments, I heard the clacking of heels and turned to see Sumire. She was still wearing her suit and ran towards me, waving all the while.

“Sorry to keep you waiting, darling!” she called in singsong as she clung to my arm.



I glanced at her and quickly detached her. “It’s only our first time doing this and you’re already making it creepy.”

“Creepy?! Excuse me?!”

“Shut up. Don’t forget how old you are.”

“Only nine years older than you! That’s a tiny difference! You should shed a few years and get back to me.”

“Careful, I think they can hear you in the police station three blocks over. Besides, aren’t we just here to take some lovey-dovey photos for your family?”

She didn’t need to be so into it.

“If we get into character now, the photos’ll look more natural! It’s just like when I’m doing the card art for *Koyagi*! I’m always thinking about what happened just before the moment was captured, and what’s gonna happen next. That’s why they come out so dynamic and natural.”

“I...guess I can’t argue with that.”

One of Murasaki Shikibu-sensei’s great talents was that she gave her 2D drawings a sense of realism. Enough to make it feel like you were right there next to the characters. It was a testament to her understanding of each scene, as well as the depths of her otherwise insane imagination. I was impressed that she was willing to come into this operation with the same ethos for a couple of photos and, wait, hold on a second.

“I admire your artistic drive, but you can’t be like this right now.”

“Why not?” Sumire blinked.

“We’re not that far from the school right now,” I replied in a low voice, looking around. “If anyone sees us, the rumors’ll spread like wildfire. You might even get fired.”

“Come on, it’s not like anyone at school even knows who you are.”

“That’s it, I’m out.”

“Funny, but you know it’s true! And—wait, you’re really leaving?!”

“I’m insulted, so I’m going home.”

“What?! Usually it’s the girl who’s meant to storm off in a huff!”

“No one in the Alliance seems to believe this, but I’ve got feelings too, you know?”

I was a sixteen-year-old high school student at the peak of puberty. Even if I had decided to trade in the “teenage experience” for an efficient lifestyle aimed at securing our future, I wasn’t a heartless robot. I didn’t have the maturity to be fully in control of my emotions. Cute girls sent my heart rate up, and being made fun of for my lack of friends and presence hurt.

I didn't want to have more friends than I needed, because they would waste my precious time. And I know it's hard to imagine, but it still makes me lonely every now and again.

"I-I'm sorry. Don't go, Ooboshi-kun," Sumire said, her tone a little more serious than before. It was the same voice she used in the classroom, but without the frightening venom. "I'm your teacher. I care about you, even if you have a boring school life."

"I know you're trying to be a caring teacher right now, but all I can hear is Murasaki Shikibu-sensei making fun of me." I sighed and faced her. "I was kidding. I'm not going anywhere."

"Really? Phew!" Sumire smiled and clapped her hands together gently.

It gave me a very "mature older-sister" vibe, and I found myself wondering how I got myself in this situation in the first place.

"Looks, if someone sees us, we're screwed. So just tone down the whole lovey-dovey thing, okay?"

"But..."

"Our photos will be convincing enough if we just act like a regular couple on a regular date. Not all couples are all over each other all the time, you know? Considering you're supposed to be in teacher mode for your family, I think a calmer, more mature atmosphere would probably be more convincing too."

"Right. I guess that makes sense." Sumire placed a finger to her lip in thought and nodded.

For now, it looked like she was going to stay in her less insane mode, which was great for me because it meant my brain would still be in one piece by the end of this. I decided to do my bit by treating her like a teacher deserved...as long as she behaved.

"Shall we start the date, then?"

"Okay! I've written out a plan, actually," Sumire said, pulling out a clipboard like an astrophysicist. "I know you like to be efficient, so I went ahead and calculated the shortest route to each spot. That way, we can get this done in the least amount of time possible."

She gave me a confident smile. It was easy to forget, but she did teach math.

"Our first destination..."

Sumire paused as though she were a scientist attending a presentation of the most revolutionary breakthroughs, carrying with her forbidden knowledge that she was hesitant to unleash upon the world.

"...is the bubble tea place."

Was there anything more pathetic than a high school girl

following the trends just because they were “in”? Ah, yes. There were those who insisted a new trend wouldn’t catch on. Except then it would, and they’d be desperately chasing after it two or three weeks late.

There used to be voices criticizing the new bubble tea fad. That didn’t stop waves of high school girls. Only time would tell if these businesses would survive another year or two, but right now you couldn’t deny their success.

It was common to hear people refer to bandwagon hoppers as “foolish,” but I couldn’t agree with that evaluation. The real fools were those who refused to get on the bandwagon, while also having no clear idea of what they’d rather be doing instead. Case in point: us.

“I never thought we’d end up drinking bubble tea.”

“Me neither.”

Murasaki Shikibu-sensei and I had discussed this very trend in the Alliance group chat a few months back, when we heard about the long lines of girls outside the bubble tea stand.

AKI: Imagine lining up for hours just to pump your body full of empty calories. It’s a waste on all fronts.

Murasaki Shikibu-sensei: ikr! i don’t get normies sometimes.

AKI: Oh well. It’s not like we’ll ever end up drinking the stuff ourselves.

Murasaki Shikibu-sensei: lolol

Murasaki Shikibu-sensei: at least it’s graced up with the tapioca challenge (◡‿◡)

AKI: Yup yup.

I wouldn’t complain if someone showed up to blank that conversation from my memory.

“Here you go! Two Ultra-Super-Deluxe-Poggers Milk Teas!”

I took the plastic cups from the clerk, who looked strangely like a shaven monk, and took them back to where Sumire was sitting at a table. Sumire stared at the cups brimming with big black boulders of starch. It was a wonder how there was any space for the liquid.

“And they call this ‘tea’?” Sumire said.

“You’re forgetting the ‘bubble’ part, which seems to make up 99% of it.”

“Rounding that up makes it 100%.”

“Right. So it’s practically just a cup of tapioca pearls.”

Because of the boom in bubble tea, stores fought to add more and more “features” to the drink to distinguish themselves from the

competition. The final result of that rapid evolution was what we had: a cup of starch balls.

“And, uh...” Sumire hesitated. “You’re supposed to *drink* it, right?”

“I guess. But you don’t have to. It doesn’t look particularly healthy.”

“No, I have to send a photo of us having this stuff. Here, take my phone and make sure you get a good snap. First, we’ll have me drinking by myself, and then you by yourself. Finally, we’ll take one together.”

“Fine, but I’m not much of a photographer, you know?”

No friends meant no reason to take pictures. One friend who didn’t like having his picture taken also meant no reason to take pictures. Not that it bothered me.

“It doesn’t have to be perfect. I’m beautiful enough to save the shot, so come at me!” Sumire started to swirl the frogspawn in her cup around with her straw.

“Here goes!”

Sumire squeezed her eyes shut, wrapped her lips around the straw, and sucked. There was a strange sound. Clearly one of the balls was stuck up there. Sumire kept sucking, her cheeks caving in on themselves. A red flush was starting to color them.

You ever seen your dad trying to blow up a huge inflatable pool with nothing but his mouth, slowly losing oxygen? Well, Sumire looked like that.

“You’re sucking pretty hard there. Can’t believe nothing’s coming out.”

Let’s be honest, since it consisted of 99% tapioca pearls, that “drink” was basically solid mass. Sumire’s determination and ability not to suffocate was so impressive, I took a quick photo. Somehow I managed to lose the bubble tea from the shot altogether. I know, I know, I sucked at using the camera app, but that wasn’t all. Sumire kept moving her head as she tried desperately to suck up the tapioca.

What I was left with was a photo showing Sumire’s red face and puckered lips. Whatever, I’d just take another one.

Suddenly, Sumire let the straw out of her mouth and started gasping for breath. “This... This is pretty tough!”

“Wait, don’t move so much! Argh, I messed up the shot again. Why don’t you just use a spoon anyway? It’s probably easier.”

I took the second photo the moment the straw fell out of her mouth, taking a wonderful shot of Sumire with her mouth half-open and gasping for breath, the white milk from the bubble tea dribbling from her lips.

“O-Okay, now we’ll take one together.”

“You sure you don’t want me to retake these?”

“I don’t have much charge, so let’s just take what we can before heading to the next spot. Besides, you can do anything, right? You probably got some good ones.”

“Uh, these aren’t great, to be honest. I’m not sure you should be letting me have the camera.”

“You’re always so modest! ‘Can’t do this,’ ‘can’t do that.’ And then we look and it turns out you’ve won photographer of the year.”

“Yeah, but I mean it this time.”

“Keep talking and the battery’s gonna go. Now get one of both of us! Come on!”

“Uh, you might wanna wipe your mouth fi—”

“No time. Cheese!” Sumire sidled up to me and grinned right next to my face.

Her cheeks were still red from the lack of oxygen, and she still had that milky tea by her lips. If she was fine with it, whatever. I took the shot with the front-facing camera.

“Great! On to the next place!”

“You’ve barely touched your tea.”

“Hey, I drank all the tea. Eating the balls one by one would take forever.”

“Good point. Just, please wipe your mouth already.” I sighed and passed Sumire a clean tissue from my pocket as she tugged impatiently at my shirt.

She was so immature for someone whose face, body, tits, tits, tits, tits, and chest were so developed. Oh, whoops, my brain got stuck there. It was just that, every time she clung to me this evening, I could feel them through her clothes. And she was doing a lot of clinging. I didn’t want to lose the power of common sense, so I made sure to shake her off before I suffered any damage.

“So, uh, what did she do with these pictures?”

“Sent them straight to her family group chat, apparently. Kept saying she didn’t have the battery left to check them properly.”

“R-Right. She really went and did that, huh?”

“Problem?”

“Yes and no...”

“Huh?”

“I’d just be prepared if I were you.”

Interlude: Iroha and Mashiro on the Case

“Move, Iroha-chan! I gotta kill them!”

“W-W-Wait, Mashiro-senpai! Put down the tapioca-based weapon!”

Hi. I’m Special Agent Kohinata Iroha, age fifteen. Right now, I was struggling to hold back Mashiro-senpai, who looked like she wanted to beat the crap out of our targets! We were in the bubble tea place at our local shopping mall.

This store was famous for packing their drinks with more tapioca than you could shake a stick at, so Mashiro-senpai and I were eating them with spoons. There was nothing like the taste of those squishy bubbles, but I kinda wished they put a bit more tea in these...

Anyway, you’re probably wondering what we were doing here. We were observing Senpai and Sumire-chan-sensei from a short distance away as they took a lovely photo together.

Before you say it, we weren’t stalking them. I was a private investigator whose job it was to protect my clients from infidelity! Just call me Iroha Holmes and my partner Mashiro Watson! Not that I ever read any of the books.

Mashiro-senpai, my jealous and, frankly, more immature partner, was stirring her Ultra-Super-Deluxe-Poggers Milk Tea with a spoon while glaring at the couple we were investigating.

“It’s not fair... It’s not fair...” she muttered over and over.

“Careful, or your tea’s gonna turn into a monster.”

Her bubbles were starting to break and clump to her spoon, becoming one giant mass of starch. That was what I meant when I said “tapioca-based weapon.” I could practically hear that miserable tapioca chimera pleading with its creator, going all “Ma...shi...ro...” in a deep, monotone voice.

“Just stay quiet, okay? They’ll hear us!”

“I know...”

“We’ll be able to rib Senpai for weeks over this, so might as well enjoy every last second!” I grinned.

Honestly, I didn’t see Sumire-chan-sensei as much of a threat. After extensive research, I knew Senpai’s tastes well, and I also knew that Murasaki Shikibu-sensei failed to tick even one of his boxes. As far as rivals went, Mashiro-senpai was way more dangerous, what

with her cute and neat appearance. That was why I was chilled enough to try and stop her acting out of jealousy.

“Aki is a jerk!”

“Hey, I know it looks bad, but just remember they’re not a real couple.”

Sweet little Mashiro-senpai was now sucking up the small remnants of milk tea produced by her abuse of the tapioca creature in her cup. I patted her on the head. She reminded me of an old businessman going to the bar to get drunk and offload his complaints from his long day at work. Not that I think about that kinda stuff often, being the super-innocent high schooler that I am!

Still, it surprised me how jealous she was getting. Her crush on Senpai might’ve been bigger than I thought. I wasn’t really sure how to act around her. She pretended like she hated couples in general, but I knew there were some serious feelings behind that facade.

“It’s not right. You can’t just pretend to be engaged. It’s an insult to the institution of marriage!”

Pot, meet kettle...

I held my tongue.

Mashiro-senpai puffed up her cheeks like a sulky child. “It’s totally unbelievable! Why are they taking pictures? Why are they getting on so well?”

I laughed nervously and stuck my spoon into my cup. There was a lot to unpack in her jealousy. I tried to scoop up a glob of tapioca bubbles, but they didn’t budge.

The hell?!

The stupid bubbles had stuck together and formed a mass as hard as iron. I scowled at my cup and kept attacking it with my spoon.

“Hey, Iroha-chan. How come you’re so calm?” Mashiro-senpai asked suddenly.

“Huh?”

Just then, time seemed to stop. I froze and stared at the girl across from me. Her eyes seemed to draw me in.

“I know,” she added.

“Know, uh, what?”

My heart was pounding as I stared back at her. The slight squint of her eyes seemed to taunt me, as though she could read my every thought.

Did she know...that I knew everything?

Did she know I saw her confession? That I knew Senpai rejected her? Although it was unfair, I pretended I was completely clueless with Mashiro-senpai. Just to keep the peace between us.

What if she knew I was just feigning ignorance? How was I supposed to explain things to her? Had I hurt her? Did she hate me for

it? My heart was pounding and I felt sick.

Mashiro-senpai opened her mouth again.

“You like Aki, don’t you, Iroha-chan?”

My mouth fell open.

This wasn’t the worst-case scenario—but it was pretty darn close. If she found out the truth here, we might end up going to war.

“What are you talking about?”

“I mean, it’s not like I have any evidence,” Mashiro-senpai averted her gaze, “but I just get that impression. Like, when I saw the play before.”

“The play?”

The National Drama Fair. That was what she was referring to. Our school’s drama club had been in danger of getting disbanded, so the 05th Floor Alliance stepped in to help. The actor for the main heroine couldn’t make it so I had stepped in to take her role, even at the risk of mom finding out. Well, nothing happened, so I don’t think she did.

“Your acting didn’t look like acting. I don’t think you could’ve acted the way you did if you didn’t genuinely have feelings for the hero. For Aki.”

Even if mom never found out, I never expected that play to reveal my feelings for him. Sure, the entire play was built around the hero and heroine assuming their love was unrequited, leading to some pretty clichéd, romantic scenes. But hey, I was just following the script. I was totally in-character, and my personal feelings had nothing to do with it!

If only!

“C-C’mon, Mashiro-senpai. I was just acting, you know.”

“Really?” Mashiro-senpai eyed me carefully.

She was totally suspicious! She was starting to realize she wasn’t the only one with a horse in this race. Wait, in the first place, did Mashiro-senpai not realize that *she* was totally obvious about her feelings? Hey listen, I know that you’re head-over-heels for Senpai yourself! Are you trying to start a war, or don’t you know that I know that you know I know?!

I didn’t want there to be any hard feelings between us just because we were crushing on the same guy. Far as I cared, a cold war with smoke and mirrors was way better.

Why was she so concerned with how I felt anyway? What would happen if I answered honestly? Could we still be friends after that? I couldn’t really see how, to be honest. Or maybe overthinking things this way wasn’t normal.

I spent my entire life keeping a close eye on my mom’s reactions, careful not to do the stuff I really wanted in case it hurt her. I couldn’t count the number of times I wished I couldn’t read her or understand

her feelings as well as I did. That knowledge was a heavy burden to bear. My choices were always to fight her or to give up. There were no misunderstandings.

This time, I had perfect knowledge of how Mashiro-senpai felt, and I knew that my answer had the power to hurt her.

“Aha, I get what you’re sayin’! Welp, think whatever you want!”

“So...you don’t like Aki?”

“Maybe, maybe not. I’m not gonna give you a straight answer. You’re a girl, right? You know we gotta keep some secrets. Let me off the hook this time, Mashiro-senpai?”

I couldn’t bring myself to just lie and say “no,” either. I hated giving this fishy, in-between answer, but it was better than being clear either way. I flashed Mashiro-senpai my most charming smile, hoping she wouldn’t press me further. Her expression was unreadable, and the silence seemed to last just a moment too long.

“Hm. Okay, then.” She nodded.

The tension drained from my body in an instant.

Thank God! I didn’t even want to imagine how things would turn out if we openly acknowledged each other as love rivals. I wasn’t strong enough to face that outcome yet.

Senpai rejected distractions like friendships and romance, all so that he was free to focus fully on his dream. That meant, until he reached his goal, I didn’t need to worry about anything changing for the worse.

“I’ve been wondering about it for a long time, but I never got the chance to ask. That’s why I brought it up now, when it’s just you and me here. I’m sorry if it took you by surprise.”

“Don’t sweat it!” I laughed.

Mashiro-senpai, I know exactly how you feel about him. I probably understand better than anyone else. I also know that it would ruin our friendship if I told you that.

For now, the danger had passed. For now, we could still be friends and have fun together.

The relief was so overwhelming, I nearly forgot.

“Oh, crap!”

“What’s the matter?”

Mashiro-senpai’s question had completely distracted me from the mission objective. I looked over at our targets’ table in a panic.

“They’re gooooooone!”

“Who are... Aaaaaaaaah!”

They were acting so gross together that anyone within a ten-meter radius would’ve been seeing pink. But when that color disappeared from our vision, neither me nor Mashiro-senpai noticed.

Chapter 3: My Homeroom Teacher's Boobs Have It In for Me

After leaving the bubble tea place, Sumire and I followed her date plan and stopped by several different stores.

First, we went to this geeky store where I had to stop Sumire going full Shikibu-mode on me. Then, we went to the arcade and took our picture in the photo booth. Sumire threw up (figuratively) when she saw how the filter gave me alien eyes like I was a true shojo manga female lead. Then it was my turn to throw up when she went all “How cute!” like she was in high school. Well, technically she was, but I meant like a high school student.

While it made me sick to my stomach, this was basically what couples did, and so we had to.

Now I was wandering around a bookstore in the mall, waiting for Sumire to return from the restroom. I wanted to get into the entertainment industry, so this was the sort of place that interested me. I headed straight for the light novel section to see if there was anything new to pique my interest. “Oh, hey! Makigai Namako-sensei!”

His series was on display on the UZA Bunko shelf, and at eye-level no less. The jet-black covers of his books stood out in the sea of white, red, and assorted bright-colored books. It was like they came from the depths of space. That’s what made them stand out enough to make you want to pick ’em up and see what they were all about.

There was a handwritten note by the display to indicate it was this store’s recommendation, and other notes which mentioned famous figures, authors, editors, and reviewers who endorsed the book. Just by holding the book, you could almost feel just how much everyone in the publishing industry wanted you to enjoy it.

You could tell by the way some of the notes were peeling off that no one had been taking care of this section of the shelf recently.

“Right... It’s been a while since the last volume of *Snow White’s Revenge Classroom*.”

That was Makigai Namako’s debut series, and arguably his most famous one. The series was a smash hit and sold over three million copies, but lately new volumes were few and far between, which made the hype around the series dwindle somewhat.

I couldn’t help but wonder if his work for the Alliance was

compromising his writing career.

I didn't know the first thing about writing novels. He told me in no uncertain terms that he could handle working on *Koyagi* alongside his series and I believed him, but perhaps he was struggling to balance the two. I knew he was mature enough to handle himself, but he was also proud and had this stubborn streak about him.

Maybe his pride prevented him from ever asking for a deadline extension, even though I told him to let me know when he needed one. Maybe I should just give him more generous deadlines anyway. I didn't want to be the reason his novel series was stalling.

Suddenly, I was hit with a surge of anxiety.

Anxiety. The emotion I always tried to repress or ignore. It was both the force driving the Alliance, and its greatest enemy. Its root began to spread out over my mind, and—

"I'm back, darling!"

"God, I think my IQ just dropped a couple points. I told you not to call me that."

"As far as I can tell, being in love makes people dumber, so put up with it. This is called getting into character."

"You're lucky nobody in love was around to hear you say that. Though I don't disagree..."

Whatever unpleasant feeling was creeping up on me before had completely vanished. I'd thank Sumire for her perfect timing, except I knew it was a total accident.

"Let's go, darling!"

"H-Hey, I can walk by myself! And I know what you said, but seriously, *stop* calling me that!"

Sumire giggled. "I think I get how Iroha-chan feels, you know?"

"Huh?"

"You're strangely cute when you get mad like this. I can't help but smile!"

Sure enough, she was doing just that.

There was a feminine sensuality about that smile that came with the knowledge that she was a teacher. Not to mention I was keenly aware of the warmth of her hand on mine. My body was heating up in response.

St-Stop it! Don't forget, this is Murasaki Shikibu-sensei for God's sake!

I suppressed the urge to hit her (after all, my body's reactions weren't exactly her fault), and allowed her to drag me away to our next destination.

This was the main event. We arrived at a swimsuit store on the second floor of the mall. The sign proudly read "Peach & Melon." This

was one of the most popular women-oriented swimsuit brands out there.

The place was filled with posters, pamphlets, and mannequins, all of which showed off the exquisite curves of their models. I knew they weren't meant to be arousing per se, but it was still an uncomfortable place for a guy like me to be, for reasons which would become quite visible if I wasn't careful.

This brand in particular catered to large-busted women who had trouble finding the perfect swimsuit in their size. That's what the CEO said in an article I read online, anyway. The popularity of Peach & Melon in this town suggested that the bust size here was above average. Even now, there were several young women with impressive chests happily browsing the shelves.

If only I were invisible, this would be paradise. But I wasn't, and it wasn't. The place was packed to the brim with scanty swimsuits. As a total virgin (yes, I admit it), I was having a hard time deciding where to look.

"Hey, Ooboshi-kun?"

"Yes?"

"This is bad." Sumire narrowed her sharp eyes. She was in full teacher mode. "There's so much T&A in this place I think I'm gonna get a nosebleed."

"What are you, a virgin?"

Imagine if any of her students were here. Their image of her would shatter into a million pieces if they heard her say *that*.

"This is my first time buying a fancy swimsuit. I never expected it to be like this. A place as lewd as this should be illegal."

"It's not supposed to be lewd. Anyway, why are you getting excited? You're a woman!"

"Doesn't matter! Everyone's got a sex drive! Oh, do you think they'd mind if I took some photos?"

"You'd get arrested, dumbass!"

Though I decided at the start to speak to her politely, I couldn't take it anymore. In the face of all these young women in swimsuits, Murasaki Shikibu-sensei had come out in full force.

"Stop looking at the girls and look at what they're wearing so you can pick what you wanna buy already. We're just here to pretend to your family we're on a date, right?"

"Hey, you're right! Okay, I'm gonna go with this!" Sumire grabbed a nearby swimsuit and tossed it into her basket.

She didn't even look at what she picked! She was totally checking out that girl over there instead!

I was too exhausted at this point to put these thoughts into words.

"You sure? You really don't want to try it on first?"

“Huh? Why?”

“Well, to see if it fits, or whether it suits you or not.”

“Oh, right, I forgot that was a thing. I never buy swimsuits, you know!”

“It’s not a swimsuit thing. You’re supposed to do it whenever you buy clothes.”

“But how? I buy all my clothes online.”

“Ah.”

Suddenly it all made sense. I did remember putting out the trash one morning to find Sumire throwing out a whole bunch of huge cardboard boxes. I had asked her where they were from, and she had told me she got all her meals, alcohol, and daily necessities online.

While not as extreme as Mashiro, Sumire also had some shut-in tendencies. No surprises there; it would be impossible for Murasaki Shikibu-sensei to get me as many illustrations as she did if she spent any of her time off not drawing. In the grander scheme of things, she compensated for never meeting deadlines by producing a ton of art.

“I don’t want the staff taking my measurements in the store, so I prefer shopping online.”

“If you get a professional to measure you, you won’t end up wasting time sending stuff back when it doesn’t fit.”

“I don’t care. I can do without comments on how fat I am or how huge my rack is, thanks.”

“I think that’s what we call a victim complex.” No one would care about her body when they were just doing their job.

“I don’t care about reality! I care about my feelings getting hurt!”

“In that case, you’re beyond help.” I sighed. “Look, since we’re here now, you might as well try it on. You *are* planning on going to the beach this summer, right?”

“I am?”

“You mean you’re not? So why insist on buying a swimsuit here then?”

“Because that’s the kinda stuff couples are supposed to do!”

“Wait, so this is all to create fake evidence for your lies? You’re not even planning on wearing that thing?”

Was this the power afforded to people with a full-time job? Did they really have enough money to waste on this kind of crap? I guess she was running two jobs, technically...

“I thought you were gonna suggest the whole Alliance hit the beach,” I said.

“Whoa! Hey, that sounds like fun! Oh boy! I can see it now... Makigai Namako-sensei, OZ, and AKI all in their swimming trunks and...and...” Sumire started panting.

“Stop right there. Namako-sensei might not even show up, you

know.”

“Let’s invite Mashiro-chan and Iroha-chan too! Aaah, I can’t wait to see them in their swimsuits!” Sumire giggled. “This is gonna be the best beach trip ever! I’ll drive us all there, okay?”

She started driving an invisible car with her hands, her face lit up with glee.

“Must be nice to enjoy all bodies, regardless of gender or number of dimensions...” I sighed. “Guess we’re going to the beach, then. So go try that swimsuit on.”

“Oh, but wait...”

“What are you grinning about now?”

“Don’t tell me you set this all up because you wanted to see me in a swimsuit? Oh, you’re too adorable!” Sumire said, poking at my cheek.

“Shut up and get changed.”

It pissed me off how she was trying to use her femininity to get on my nerves but, as a teenager, her words were enough to plant an image in my head. An image of her, my math teacher, showing way too much skin. It was all I could do to look away and push her in the direction of the fitting rooms.

“Yessir! Listen, I know I’m way sexier than any of these swimsuit models, but you can’t open the curtain, okay? Not until you get kidnapped by some black organization and are forced to drink a poison that turns you back into a small kid!”

“I wouldn’t touch that curtain with a ten-foot pole.”

With those last, unoriginal (and concerning) words, Sumire waved the swimsuit in her hands and disappeared behind the changing room curtain. With nothing better to do, I simply waited in front of it.

When Sumire passed me her phone before, it barely had any charge left. If I left the store now, there was a chance she wouldn’t be able to get back in contact with me. Not that it should take her more than a few minutes to try the damn thing on. It felt weird to wander around a store full of young women buying swimsuits too, which was why I decided to stay right where I was.

I heard the rustling of clothing as Sumire took her suit off.

She’s naked now, huh?

I hurriedly shook the impure thought from my mind. This was Sumire. Murasaki Shikibu-sensei. Even if she was, admittedly, quite attractive, I mustn’t forget the rotten personality that lay at her core. I could never lust after somebody like *her*! Us men weren’t such animals that we simply fell for anybody who was even slightly beautiful, you know!

“Any man would have a hard time leaving a beauty like you alone. Seeing a girl like you wearing a lovely swimsuit like this is

gonna drive me crazy.”

I jumped. Was someone reading my thoughts? Wait! Before that, there was something else about that voice which made me nervous. The voice itself.

What? No! What is he doing here?!

“Oh, stop it! I bet you say that to all the girls!”

“How could you? I know I may not look it, but I’m an honest man. Don’t think of me as Tsukinomori Makoto. Think of me as a mirror that can tell no lies!”

Tsukinomori Makoto. CEO of Honeyplace Works. My uncle, and Mashiro’s dad. He promised my team a spot at his company in return for fake-dating his daughter until graduation. It wasn’t an exaggeration to say he was the most important man in my life right now.

He was supposedly a very busy man, but apparently not so busy he couldn’t show up here with a brand new woman in tow!

“You’re a mirror, are you? Well then, who is the fairest of them all?”

“It’s you, of course!”

“Haha! Oh, you!” The woman giggled, lightly touching my uncle’s arm.

They were already getting on this well, huh? I remembered my uncle seducing a waitress from a family restaurant recently. They even spent a “wonderful evening” together...and yet the woman he was with now mysteriously didn’t look anything like her.

I’d never met a more daring womanizer than him.

In terms of stature, height, and facial features, this woman was similar to the waitress, but the way she spoke, her behavior, and the way she did her make-up were totally different. Clearly, Tsukinomori-san had a type. A type that was purely founded in looks. My already low opinion of him sunk even lower.

The last time I saw Mashiro’s mom, I was in elementary school, so I didn’t have a clear picture of her in my mind. If Mashiro’s looks were anything to go by, though, there was no doubt she was beautiful. It was utterly baffling. How could he go around chasing other women when he already had a stunning wife at home? Not to say that it’d be okay to do if his wife were ugly, of course.

At the very least, he was a good example of how *not* to live my life...not that I would have the opportunity, since I wasn’t popular with women at all, but—wait, I’m starting to lose my self-esteem.

“Ugh, why the hell am I thinking this nonsense?!”

I could see the clingy couple approaching in the corner of my vision. The woman was holding several swimsuits, meaning she was heading right for the fitting rooms.

I can't let them see me!

A beautiful teacher took her student out to have fun and buy swimsuits. Anyone who saw us would realize we were on a date! I might have forgotten to mention that fake-dating Mashiro wasn't the only condition for my uncle allowing my team to work at his company. There was another one, and it was pretty big.

I wasn't allowed to have a girlfriend.

It might seem like that rule was so my relationship with Mashiro was more credible, but knowing my uncle as I did, I was pretty sure it had more to do with his weird vendetta against teenagers in happy relationships. I thought that was pretty rich coming from someone with a different woman on his arm every week, but reasonable facts were no match for irrational feelings.

"Oh my God, what is this?! I thought it was bad when I saw it, but it's ten times worse now that I'm wearing it! Hey, Ooboshi-kun, wanna see? I'm warning you though, you're gonna get a serious nosebleed!"

"D-Don't talk to me..."

"Huh? Why not? It's not like there's anyone we know here! Isn't shopping together way more fun if we can talk about it?"

"That's true, but I'm kinda worried that there is someone—"

I spotted Tsukinomori-san in the corner of my eye making a face as though he noticed something.

Shit! He's turning round! I gotta do something quick!

"H-Hey!"

I dove behind the fitting room curtain without a moment's delay. I quickly clasped my hand over a surprised Sumire's mouth and put a desperate finger to my lips. She nodded frantically. I didn't remove my hand, but instead listened closely to what was going on outside the fitting room.

"I must be hearing things..."

"What's the matter?"

"Nothing, nothing. I just thought I heard a familiar voice. It couldn't be, though; he's not the type to come to a store for sexy ladies!"

So he did hear me!

Damn, that was way too close!

"What? You mean I didn't have your full attention?"

"Come now! That's not true at all! You don't know what you do to me, do you? But I can show you...if you like."

"Show me...how? ...Mmh."

"Come here. There's a free fitting room."

"We can't! Not here! The other customers will hear us!"

"The guilt and the danger'll just make it feel so much better. If you don't want people to hear you, you're just going to have to keep

quiet, aren't you?"

"Oh, you..."

There was the sound of people entering the fitting room next to ours, and I could immediately hear gasps as they started getting intimate.

What the hell are they doing?! Wait, don't answer that, please. This is a public place! They're not even being subtle! It's gotta be less than a ten-minute walk to the nearest hotel. Seriously?!

"Mm... Aaah...♡"

Was that a HEART on the end of that line?! What is this, an H-game?!
GAAAAAAAAAAAAAGH!

I was waiting for someone to show up and tell me it was a prank. Why did I have to sit there and listen to my uncle...doing *that*?! I was tempted to call the police and report this; it would probably be the best outcome for all involved.

The lewdness in his partner's voice was making me feel as though she was right next to me. It was like she was gasping desperately right next to my ear. I hurriedly shook my head to try and clear it.

"Ooohoshikuun... I..."

Something tickled my palm. Now that woman was calling my name, and...wait, this was too real to be a hallucination, right?

My brain was only now gathering up my scattered, confused thoughts and putting the pieces together. Sixteen-year-old Ooboshi Akiteru, a teenager at the height of puberty, just walked into his teacher's fitting room and covered her mouth to stop her screaming. That was a fact, no matter how you spun it.

Yeah, I know this is fishier than the market on a Friday. There was so little thought behind my actions that I didn't have an excuse prepared, and if Sumire wanted to call the cops on me, I'd be done for.

"I-I'm sorry. I didn't have a choice. Will you trust me on that?" I lowered my voice to make sure our neighbors couldn't hear us.

Sumire nodded like a frightened rabbit, tears welling up in her eyes.

"I'm going to take my hand away now. But just promise not to yell or anything, okay?"

I released her mouth, and Sumire started gasping for breath.

"Wh-What was that all about?"

"Tsukinomori-san's here! You know, CEO of Honeyplace Works?"

"He's Mashiro-chan's dad, right? The one who asked you to be her fake boyfriend?"

"Yeah, and I also promised him I wouldn't get into an actual relationship. That's why I don't want him to see me with you!"

"Oh. Makes sense. I thought your years of repressed carnal desires were finally catching up with you."

“Sorry?”

Somebody had been reading too much smut online.

At the risk of outing myself as some kind of brute, I sometimes forgot that Sumire was technically female. I knew my actions must have spooked her, so I decided it was only right to apologize.

“I’m really sorry. How can I make it up to you?”

“Uh, um... How about you just make sure you don’t look down?”

“Huh?”

It was only then that I noticed. Speaking of Peach & Melon, that was exactly what I had an eyeful of with my head bowed like this.

Her body, usually covered by a suit or tracksuit, was laid practically bare before me. Her butt was smooth and taut like a peach, and her impressively large melons were just...there. The black bikini she wore was almost struggling to keep it all in. The dark color against the paleness of her skin just seemed to amplify everything.

Sumire was squirming and struggling to hide her bountiful flesh with her arms like the sweet, bashful woman she wasn’t. I could feel my body heating up to its very core.

“S-Sorry. I’m really making a mess of stuff today, huh?” I said, quickly averting my gaze.

“It’s okay. It was an emergency, right?” Sumire replied calmly.

She could really be mature when she needed to. It was a relief not to hear her scream or make a big deal of it all.

I was still surprised to see her acting so bashfully when she came out with shameless nonsense on the regular, but I guess it made sense. Right now, it was her own dignity at stake, whereas usually other people or fictional characters took the brunt of her lewd remarks.

Things were getting more awkward with each passing second. I put a hand on the curtain so that we could make our escape before Tsukinomori-san and his lover were done with their shenanigans.

“Angh! Wait, there’s a gap in the curtain! People will see us!”

“Doesn’t that just make this more exciting?” Tsukinomori-san purred.

“Oh, you! If we get arrested, I’m relying on you to pay bail!”

Great. We were stuck here. They just had to leave that tiny gap in the curtain, huh?

“Want to...stay here a little longer?” Sumire looked up at me demurely.

“Yeah...” I could only nod.

The silence was broken by Sumire’s heavy breathing, which was almost deafening.

So there I was in a tiny fitting room with my math teacher in the most revealing swimsuit known to man. We were so close that I could feel the heat coming off her body. Her scent assaulted my nostrils. It

was probably the same for her. That weird guy at school with the muscle fetish and a thing for Sumire would probably have a heart attack if he could see us now.

What didn't help was the noises from the next cubicle getting louder and louder.

"Oh! You really know how to use your fingers! It's like you know all of my buttons..."

"Just call me the midnight pianist, my dear."

"But you only know how to play your wife, don't you? It just so happens that touching me in the same way works too, right?"

"O-Oh! What a thing to say! Let me show you all of me, then! I'll play you the most beautiful waltz you've ever heard!"

They went from H-game to full-on bad porn novel. I didn't know there were couples who *actually* described the woman as a musical instrument to be played. Everything I knew was being flipped upside down today.

Never mind playing her a waltz, my uncle should be waltzing himself down to the police station.

Well, guess what? My uncle couldn't read my thoughts and now their activities were accelerating with all the speed of a runaway freight train, while I desperately tried to keep my brain from exploding. Sumire breathing faster wasn't helping.

I glanced at her. I could see her ears which peeked out from under her smooth hair. They were flushed pink.

Don't tell me she's getting turned on?

I couldn't blame her. With the combination of what was happening next door and her scantily-clad, voluptuous body in front of me, my body was reacting just like any man's would. I was just shocked that Sumire was feeling it too. I always put her in this weird category of "female virgin" or "gross shotacon teacher," so it was kinda surprising that she was reacting like any human would here.

"I...I can't take it... I can't take it anymore..." Sumire gasped.

"S-Sumire-sensei?"

"Ooboshi-kun... Would you hear me out?"

"Uh! Uh, sure!" I swallowed.

She wasn't about to ask if...if we could do it too...right?

Don't get me wrong. I wasn't the type to revel in this kind of situation, and it was definitely awkward. At the same time, if you asked me right now if I was able to turn down her tempting advances, the answer was...I don't know. It was like a fork in the road, with one side being the same corrupted path my uncle was on. I didn't want to go down that road. It was like the angel and devil on my shoulders were having a dangerous brawl with both of them evenly matched.

"Isn't the girl in there super hot?"

Sumire's question interrupted my thoughts.

"Sumire-sensei. I'm glad you're a dumbass. Thank you."

That question was all it took for the burning urges within me to fizzle out and be replaced with cool relief. Was this how animals felt when humans were forcing them to breed? Maybe I should start campaigning against that.

"Huh? Why're you thanking me? Oh, right! So, that woman next to us, right? She talks like a total power-bottom...uh, I mean, like, it's like she can take way more than Tsukinomori-san is giving, or like, she's trying to rile him up, if you know what I mean? But she's not trying to take over at all; she's just making him give her more and more!" Sumire started ranting. "And the CEO guy is letting her do it, even though he's pretending to be in charge. Hey, tell me. Your uncle's secretly a bottom, right? And they just started doing it like that without talking about their roles or anything, but it's going really well in there, like they're perfectly compatible, and it's just so...so...!" Sumire gave me a quiet, breathless running commentary on the couple next door.

Her face was bright red as she put her ear to the divider between our cubicles.

"Thank God you're more interested in them than me..."

"I mean, you gave me a pretty big shock. You had my heart racing for a sec before I remembered you're past twelve. I guess I was actually getting all excited about what was happening next door instead of anything you were doing."

"You know, that actually kinda hurts."

"Look, I wouldn't have had a problem with you if you tried this ten years ago."

"You mean...*in ten years' time*, right?"

Maybe I should just get with the times. It used to be that youth was a desirable feature in women, but that wasn't such a common opinion anymore. Things were changing, and it was hard to keep up with "normal" sometimes.

I guess it was enough that Sumire was Sumire. It certainly saved my skin this time.

Mashiro's reappearance in my life almost tipped everything upside down, and I made the decision to reject her confession so that everything could carry on as it was. If Murasaki Shikibu-sensei then started getting it on with me, the Alliance would be at risk all over again.

I spent the rest of the time trembling in fear and wondering when we'd have a chance to get out of there, but luckily it came quicker than expected. The chance, I mean. Well, not just the chance, but it so happened that the best time to escape was at that very moment.

We slipped out of the fitting room, finally free from that torture. I was still terrified we'd be spotted, but we somehow made it.

Worst escape game ever. 0/5 stars.

At least it gave me some inspiration for a new *Koyagi* scenario.

“Oh!”

“What are *you two* doing here?”

After making our great escape from Peach & Melon (though not before Sumire changed back into her regular clothes and paid for her swimsuit), we ran into a pair of familiar faces on the first floor.

“Aki!”

“Ha...ha ha!”

It was Mashiro and Iroha. Mashiro's eyes were opened wide in surprise. Iroha smirked slightly, but she avoided eye contact. They both had a thin sheen of sweat on their foreheads, as though they had been jogging between stores.

“We finally found you! We've been running around looki—”

“Wow, fancy seeing you here, Senpai! Me and Mashiro-senpai were just sharing some after-school bubble tea! I didn't know you guys were here too! Small world, huh?”

Iroha blatantly covered Mashiro's mouth with her hand while she revealed herself to be the world's worst liar.

After-school bubble tea, huh? You guys sure know how to live it up.

“So you were following us?”

Iroha and Mashiro visibly stiffened.

Don't pretend it wasn't obvious!

“You guys seriously don't have anything better to do? If you're here to sniff out things to tease with, then I'm sorry to say—”

I couldn't finish that line. Plenty of stuff had happened that would haunt me forever. Especially if there were witnesses.

“So what did you guys see exactly? And how much?”

“Huh? What kinda question is that? Did you do something...*bad*?!” Iroha gaped at me.

She had her claws in me now like a particularly annoying cat. Ugh. Why did I open my stupid mouth? At least now I knew they hadn't witnessed the horrific scenes in Peach & Melon.

“Aki. Explain yourself! Depending on your answer, I might have to exterminate our teacher!” Mashiro's eyes were dark with confused rage.

I know who's showing up in my nightmares tonight...

“Th-There's nothing to...explain?”

“Why did that sound like a question?! What's with the ellipses?! You're totally hiding something! Don't worry, Senpai, I'll let you turn

yourself in, *after* you confess all to the great Iroha Holmes!”

“Shut up! I haven’t done anything wrong! I swear! I didn’t *do* anything!”

“Liar, liar, pants on fire! I know something’s up, ’cause you did that thing where you emphasize weird words! If nothing happened, you’d be way clearer about it!”

“Dammit, you shouldn’t know me in that kinda detail. Just let me make one thing clear. Nothing happened! Something happened, but nothing *actually* happened!”

“Lamp oil, rope, bombs... What else do I need?”

“For the love of God, Mashiro, stop planning to murder our math teacher. Or at least keep it to yourself.”

I was *this* close to reporting her to the authorities.

Just then, a light laugh cut through the chaotic tension. Iroha, Mashiro, and I turned to see Sumire smirking at us. She opened up her arms and pulled the girls in close to her, nuzzling them both.

“Don’t worry! I’m not going to steal Ooboshi-kun away from you! He’s all yours!”

“No. I’m mine.”

“Quiet! You’re nothing but a cookie-cutter harem protagonist!”

“That’s right, Cookie-cutter-senpai!”

“At least pick one girl by the end of the season, scumbag!”

Three arrows, straight to the heart. Poison arrows, no less.

Okay, so I was the only guy in the group, and there were three girls, so I understood how this might look to an outsider. But consider this: one of them made it her life’s work to piss me off, while another was a shotacon fiend who’d I been locked into a changing room with while she was horridly underdressed. I think you’d forgive me for taking exception.

Mashiro was the only one with any real feelings towards me, but she wasn’t anything more than my pesky little cousin.

“Oh, that’s right! At the swimsuit store we talked about how we should all hit the beach! The Alliance plus you two, since you live on the fifth floor as well. It’s summer vacation after all! Let’s let loose and forget about stupid stuff like work and school and deadlines!”

“Forgetting about stuff doesn’t make it go away.”

I was ignored.

“Yeah! The beach! Let’s pick one with a fireworks show!”

“The beach... It’s always too crowded...”

Iroha’s face lit up. Mashiro’s also lit up, but less so.

“I do like seafood, though. And the fish and crabs in the rock pools are cute...”

“Oh, yeah, you love sea creatures right, Mashiro-senpai? Your accessories all look like shells!”

“Yeah. I could stare at the little fishies all day, and,” Mashiro looked down, her cheeks pink, “going to the beach is a great date for summer vacation. I’d love to go with Aki.”

“Listen, Mashiro. We’re not—”

“I was just saying.” She lowered her voice so only I could hear, and smiled. “I am your girlfriend, after all.”

What was I supposed to say to that?

“I guess that would count as a contractual duty.” I sighed.

“Yeah. And I have a lot of other plans for us too.”

“R-Right.”

She hadn’t told Iroha or Sumire about our fake relationship or about how she actually had feelings for me, right? She was being super clingy lately, and I couldn’t tell if she was still trying to keep it subtle or not. I mean, Iroha and Sumire already knew, so she didn’t actually have to hide it around them, but still.

“Oh, that’s right, Sumire-chan-sensei! Where did you get your swimsuit from?” Iroha asked suddenly.

“Peach & Melon, up on the second floor. Why?”

“I gotta get a new swimsuit myself if we’re going to the beach! I thought it’d be cool to get one from the same store as you, since we’re here and all! Time to get the sexiest swimsuit ever! One that’ll really grab Senpai’s attention!”

“Oh, then I’ll come too!” Mashiro said. “I only have a school swimsuit right now. Well, I never took part in the swimming lessons, so I haven’t actually worn it.”

Just then, I felt a shiver race up my spine.

“Uh, I wouldn’t recommend that place. I mean, not right now, anyway.”

Depending on Tsukinomori-san’s endurance, he might still be up there having a grand old time. I mean, I *doubted* it, but I wasn’t prepared to risk Mashiro’s mental stability like that.

“Why not? What’s wrong with it?” Iroha asked.

“I don’t understand.”

I had no idea how to explain it to them, so I turned to Sumire for help.

Come on, Murasaki Shikibu-sensei! Help me out here!

Her face lit up as she received my telepathic plea for help, and she nodded eagerly. “I agree with Ooboshi-kun! Peach & Melon would be fine for Iroha-chan, but Mashiro-chan, I think Cherry & Berry would be more your style!”

“Cherry and...?” Mashiro frowned.

Sumire gave her a reassuring pat on the shoulder before grinning and giving her a thumbs-up. “Don’t worry! Size doesn’t matter!”

“What?”

Did Sumire forget what we witnessed literally less than fifteen minutes ago, or did she deliberately misunderstand why I was trying to stop them going to Peach & Melon? And if she was going to misunderstand, why did it have to be in such a mean way?

“You agree, right, Ooboshi-kun?”

“No comment.”

In the end, the girls decided to buy their swimsuits separately on a later date, and so we all headed home. Mashiro, who had clearly done some Googling about Peach & Melon’s mission statement, went off at me later for what I said, but it was understandable so I took it without complaint. Then I went to Murasaki Shikibu-sensei and abused the hell out of her pressure points.

“Yup, sounds like a typical day for a cookie-cutter harem protagonist.”

“Don’t you start, Ozu.”

“Oh, it’s not just me. Trust me.”

“Ugh. Well tell me, if I am a harem protagonist, how come all the girls around me are such pains in the—”

“Because you’re a cookie-cutter harem protagonist.”

“Gngh!”



05th Floor Alliance (4)



...



Murasaki Shikibu-sensei

it's beach time y'all!!!!



OZ

Since when?



AKI

We talked about it before. Besides, what else are you supposed to do on summer vacation?



OZ

The beach, huh? Think my laptop will get sand in it?



AKI

Not if you leave it at home like a normal person.



Makigai Namako

Sounds like you're living it up.



AKI

Hey, you're invited too. Don't you think it'd be nice if we could finally meet irl?



Makigai Namako

I'm in!



Makigai Namako

...or I wish, but I'll have to politely decline.



Murasaki Shikibu-sensei

whaaat?! why?! it's the beach! everyone under 30 loves the beach! there'll be tons of hot girls in bikinis!



Makigai Namako

You're a teacher, right? This seems inappropriate.



Murasaki Shikibu-sensei

hey, i wasted my youth! so now im gonna enjoy what i missed out on!!

OZ

OZ

Guess being introverted isn't an excuse anymore.

OZ

OZ

Thanks to anime, nerds are camping together and even going to the gym.



Makigai Namako

I can't blame them, if I'm honest.



Makigai Namako

The other two are coming as well, right? Kohinata Iroha and Tsukinomori



AKI

Huh? How'd you know?



Makigai Namako

They always go to these things. You guys seem to really like them too.

OZ

OZ

They've come to all our parties recently, too.



Murasaki Shikibu-sensei

more reason to come! teens in swimsuits!



Makigai Namako

No thanks.



Makigai Namako

Besides, my deadlines are kinda tight right now.



AKI

For your next book?



Makigai Namako

Yeah. I've been so busy lately that it's taking a while.



AKI

Is that because you're also writing our scenarios?



Makigai Namako

A little.



Makigai Namako

But don't worry, I chose to help you.



Makigai Namako

Rest assured, I wouldn't blame you if I missed any of my deadlines.



AKI

If you need more time, let me know. The scenarios can wait.



Makigai Namako

Thanks, I appreciate it. I'll try and make sure you don't need to change anything for me, though.



Murasaki Shikibu-sensei

aww. it's a shame you're not coming.



Murasaki Shikibu-sensei

but don't worry! i'll snap plenty of photos for you, so look forward to it!



OZ

Hi Satan.



AKI

What do they call this? Psychological warfare?



Murasaki Shikibu-sensei

he needs to accept his punishment for not coming!



Makigai Namako

That's one for the block list.



Murasaki Shikibu-sensei

EXCUSE ME?!



Makigai Namako

lol



Makigai Namako

I'll make my deadlines somehow...

Chapter 4: My Teacher's Little Sister Wants to Kill Me!

Finally, the last day of school. That morning before homeroom, my fellow students were all abuzz, knowing freedom was a mere day away. I ignored the boring snippets of conversation around me, ranging from "Let's go here," and "I hope I can get a boyfriend this year," to "We should totally get some bubble tea!" and worked steadily on the plan for *Koyagi's* Halloween event at my desk.

It was the last day of school, but that didn't mean I got to slack off. In fact, since it was a half-day, I was grateful for the extra time to get stuff done.

"You like Kageishi-sensei, right? Why don'tcha ask her on a date?"

"Naw, man. I'm hitting the gym all summer."

"*Again*?! It's like you've been *livin'* there recently! You've got actual boulders on your arms."

"Right! So it's time to work on my pecs! Sure, girls in swimsuits are great, but have you ever seen a macho dude in a bikini?"

"N-No, but I guess all that motivation's a good thing."

My one flippant comment at the start of the year paid off. My precious child had transcended the path of muscle fetishists and was now becoming macho himself. I was worried I'd stolen his youth away from him, but it sounded like he was on a sacred journey of self-discovery now, so it was all worth it.

He had a goal now, and he had set himself up for a great future rather than squandering his youth. Whether that was what he *wanted* was a different matter, but at least he seemed happy for now.

"I heard the pool in the next town over is free for students during summer vacation!"

"Great! Let's go! Wanna invite some more people?"

"How about some boys? Like...Kohinata-kun!"

"H-Hey, wait! Why are you grinning like that?!"

"What's up, Kohinata-kun? We're gonna hit the pool over summer vacation. Wanna come with?"

"Huh? Me?"

Ozu looked up as the squealing girls approached him. I couldn't remember their names or their faces, but two of them were the cheerful, extroverted type. The third seemed more quiet, and stared at the floor in embarrassment rather than looking at Ozu.

Yup. I know what this is all about.

The shy girl had a crush on Ozu. Her friends were trying to set them up. I'd seen it all a million times before.

"Wouldn't I get in the way? You're all girls."

"Nope! Not you, Kohinata-kun! You're special!"

"Yeah! You're the only guy we'd accept! The only one we trust not to have ulterior motives!"

"You're the prince of the class! Right?"

"U-Um, yeah. You're cool and...nice... I'd like it if you came with us..."

"Thanks. That's really kind of you."

"So—"

"I'm sorry, though. My vacation's packed with family trips and cram school already." Ozu smiled at them with the grace of a noble who lived in an old castle and enjoyed tea parties, but his words allowed no room for rebuttal.

It was the perfect rejection and, best of all, it wasn't mean.

"Aww, that's too bad. Next time, then?"

"Sure." Ozu smiled and waved as the girls returned to their desks.

It was impressive how he could reject them without making them resent him at all.

"Your social skills are top-notch. That's the class prince for ya."

"Huh? Whaddya talking about? I'm just putting into practice all the stuff you taught me. If I'm the prince, that'd make you prime minister."

"Hey, I just get all my ideas from psychology papers."

I felt my eyes watering as I thought back to just how much Ozu had grown since junior high school. I always knew he had it in him to be popular with the ladies, but I never saw him coming this far.

"All you need now is a long-term girlfriend and you'll be set. Got your eye on anyone?"

"Nah. I'm not really the type to get crushes."

"Then I guess you don't have to force yourself, though it's kinda odd considering girls are throwing themselves at you all the time."

"Right back atcha."

"Uh, I guess. Though you're way more popular than me. I do spend a lot of time with certain girls..." I glanced at my girlfriend, Tsukinomori Mashiro, who was asleep at her desk next to mine.

I never considered myself as someone who'd spend a lot of time with girls until recently. After everything that had happened, even I couldn't deny that I was spending a lot of time with girls lately.

Mashiro was the one who sparked the change in my thinking. She was the one who showed me, in no uncertain terms, that there was a girl who liked me. Though I rejected her so I could focus on the

Alliance, I couldn't see her in the same way as before anymore.

"There's fire in those eyes. So, you've decided to go for Tsukinomori-san after everything?"

"No, I was just looking and thinking."

"Oh, great. Guess it'll be Iroha, then."

"Not in a million years, so stop trying to force us together. You know she doesn't like me."

"For someone who reads psychology papers in his spare time, you sure don't understand women."

"I understand perfectly. No one who wants to be loved would act like that. I can cite you some papers, if you want."

"That makes sense for someone like you who cares about efficiency, but not everyone does. You know, human nature is...wait, how did we get onto such a sciency topic?"

Just then, there was a small pained moan from the next desk. I glanced at Mashiro, whose face was still slumped against the desk.

"Y-You okay?"

There was no reply.

"Mashiro?"

She groaned again.

"Mashiro? You feeling sick or something? If you need to go see the nurse—"

"SHUT UP!"

"Ack!"

Her voice burned hotter than the cauldrons of hell and I froze. Mashiro raised her head a few inches from her arms and glared at me like I was to be her next murder victim. Her eyes were tired and bloodshot, and deep bags were set underneath them.

"O-Oh...it was you, Aki. Sorry...for shouting."

"N-No, it's cool."

"I didn't get much sleep. Deadlines are death..."

"Deadlines?"

"Wait, no... Not my scenario deadlines... For a story. Wait, that's a secret...right? Sorry, Aki, please don't talk to me. I dunno what I'm saying anymore..."

"Sure. Sorry for talking to you when you're so tired."

"No problem..."



With that, Mashiro planted her face back on the desk, and it wasn't long before her breaths were quiet and even. It reminded me of myself when we were launching a new character or event for *Koyagi*, or Murasaki Shikibu-sensei when she was drowning in deadlines.

Mashiro, though, had mentioned a "story." Didn't she mention before that she was writing something as a hobby? Maybe she was entering it into a contest, and the deadline was coming up. Hey, if she won a rookie prize from UZA Bunko, that would mean she was following in Makigai Namako-sensei's footsteps. Kinda funny to think about.

Anyway, it looked like she was forging ahead to reach her personal goals, and that was admirable.

Good luck, Mashiro.

I smiled down at the exhausted soldier, feeling a certain kinship with her.

"Hmm...nngh..."

I should've seen this coming at least thirty minutes ago.

Time seemed to flow at a fraction of its usual pace as we sat in the gymnasium.

It was the closing ceremony before summer vacation. Was there any greater waste of time than this monotonous charade forced upon the entire school? We were forced into uncomfortable pipe chairs, and I doubted anyone was listening to the principal and the vice principal as they rattled off the standard end-of-semester tripe. Normally I'd spend this time thinking about new features for *Koyagi*, getting as much use out of my brain as I could, since I had no physical tools to help me.

Right now, the game was the last thing on my mind. Instead, I was desperately (but silently) chanting a prayer to cleanse myself of these impure thoughts I was having.

Could you really blame me, when Mashiro's head was leaning on my shoulder, her face sweeter than any angel's as she breathed quietly in her sleep?

Her gentle breathing tingled the nerves in my ear, and the sweet scent coming off her hair planted roses in my lungs. You sometimes see couples in this kind of situation late at night on the train. Seeing that in a public place was enough to make me puke, but now it was happening to me.

"Look how gooey Ooboshi and Tsukinomori-san are together!"

"I always see them fight, but I guess deep down, they really care about each other."

“Is it just me, or has Tsukinomori-san been way sweeter to him lately?”

I could hear the whispers of our classmates around us. It pissed me off that they were using us to temper the tedium that was the closing ceremony. Was this what zoo animals felt like? It was humiliating, and all I wanted to do was gouge out my classmates' eyes with a pointy stick. Though I guess they weren't responsible for my emotional response to things.

Mashiro must've really been suffering. Even on our way to the gymnasium, she kept nodding off and nearly falling over. The seating order for the ceremony was the same as in class, so I ended up next to her. She gave up trying to stay awake the moment she sat down, and designated my shoulder to be her personal pillow. Not that I minded too much.

I swallowed, trying to rehydrate my dry throat. I'd never seen Mashiro so vulnerable and so close to me. The shape of her eyelashes, the shine of her skin, even the tiny, soft hairs of her cheeks. Her face was a work of art, and one that I could stare at for hours without—

Wait, this wasn't like me.

I felt a surge of guilt well up inside me from watching her without her knowledge, and I quickly looked away. I could still feel her warm weight on my shoulder, but just looking away helped compose me a little.

I searched for something to distract myself. I found Ozu, who was sitting with a perfect posture and a serene smile on his face. The bastard knew how to fall asleep while making it look like he was paying attention.

Otoi-san sat further away. She was close to sliding off her chair entirely, with her head against its back. She was fast asleep, the very pinnacle of laziness. In fact, she was so unashamedly asleep, not even the teachers seemed bothered. None of them moved to wake her up and scold her.

I wondered if Otoi-san was always like this in her own class. I didn't know if she lacked social awareness or just didn't care, but the way she lived her life so freely was almost admirable.

“It's now time for each year's representatives' address. For the first years, we have Kohinata Iroha-san.”

“Ah...”

I accidentally let my voice out as the head of the broadcasting club spoke that familiar name. Iroha stood up obediently from the first years' seating. She stepped up to the stage with a gait that was bold yet elegant, her golden hair fluttering behind her. She was the perfect picture of a sweet, well-behaved teenager. If there was a prize awarded for Girl Most Suited to Walking Through a Field of

Sunflowers in a White Dress, Iroha would crush the competition.

“It’s Kohinata-san!”

“She’s just as beautiful as the rumors said! She looks so refined too!”

“Isn’t her light hair just so stylish? She pulls it off effortlessly! Oh, and did you know she’s Kohinata-kun’s little sister?”

“I guess good looks and cuteness runs in the family!”

“Man, she’s adorable! Damn, I want a girlfriend as pure as her!”

“Give it up, dude. A girl as cute as her’s gotta have a guy already!”

“Y-You can’t know for sure! Lemme dream, will ya?”

I could hear the whispers of our surrounding classmates. Again.

Rumors that the top student among the first years was just so perfect, cute, and smart started around after the school year began, somewhere in the second half of April. Even now, in late July, people were still talking about how amazing Iroha was, and the gossip showed no signs of slowing.

She was “ignorance is bliss” incarnate. If these students realized the truth, they’d also learn the crushing lesson that nothing in life was perfect.

Iroha stood in front of the microphone and swept her calm gaze over the curious and adoring students before her. Her eyes met mine and stopped on me. She froze as though her brain was encountering an error. That sweet smile remained plastered on her face as her emotionless gaze bore into me.

Was there something on my face?

I looked back at her, not quite sure what was going on. That was when I saw it.

A fishy smile flashed across her face. It was so quick that no one else noticed. A nanosecond of evil intention. A single change of expression, which you’d only notice if you were the target of her wind-ups day after day. I shuddered when I realized what a look like that might mean.

“A new school and a new classroom. When we sat here for the entrance ceremony, everything was new and scary, but now three whole months have passed. We’re seeing everything through different eyes than we did back then, we’ve gotten to know our classmates, and we’ve made lots of new friends.” Iroha rattled off the beginnings of a standard speech. She paid no mind to me while I sat there, holding my breath and waiting for her to do something annoying. “Apparently, there are even some of us who have found love and like to flaunt it in front of everybody.”

Now she was going off-script. There in the middle of her standard ceremonial speech, there lay a line that practically screamed “My IQ is 3!” The audience began to murmur. Since she was looking over the

crowd as she said it, many students seemed to take it as an order to pick out and shame the couples who were “flaunting” their “newfound love.”

Some of those couples were poked by their peers, while others were glared at. Mashiro and I were no exception. Other students stared daggers at us.

That bitch! She did that on purpose just 'cause she saw Mashiro sleeping on me!

“What the heck are you doing?” I asked her silently through a hard stare.

“It’s your fault for being so indecent!” she replied with a certain look, too quickly for anybody to notice.

“Bitch!”

Her eyes were pointing and laughing at me, but the rest of her was disguised as the perfect honor student that she wasn’t. I wanted to get up there and then and show her a lesson, but there was nothing I could do in the middle of the closing ceremony without looking like a total freak. I had no choice but to hold it in.

“Pfft. Who’s the one flaunting PDAs? You’re acting like a total teenager, and you should be ashamed of yourself, dumbass!”

“Dammit! You’re right!”

Using the attention against me like that was a perfect strategy. I knew that Mashiro only fell asleep like this because she was exhausted. Everyone else would just think I was a super sweet boyfriend letting my adorable girlfriend rest her little head on my manly shoulder.

“Happiness is a wonderful thing. Classes, events, consultations with our teachers... I believe that every little thing we do at this school has a direct effect on our future happiness. However, it is important to practice moderation in all things. Restraint and modesty are of the utmost importance. For example, imagine working hard for your future dream, but then throwing it all away to thrust all your love and attention at a cute girl you happened to cross paths with. There’s nothing more shameless.”

Every one of her emphasized words pierced through me, each sharper than the last.

She’s totally aiming this all at me! I know this is my fault, but still!

Most of her speech ended up being a jab at me wrapped in a thin veil of academic pep talk. Its only saving grace was that, while the students looked confused every time Iroha said words like “lovey-dovey” and “flirty,” in the end they took her speech at face value. Thank God for the low intelligence of our student population.

Well, actually, most of the students here were smart and hoped to

go on to college. Why there seemed to be certain times when the average IQ dropped a hundred points or so was a mystery.

Anyway, apart from Iroha's speech, the rest of the ceremony finished up without incident.

"There are two types of students when it comes to enjoying summer vacation. The first are the winners. Those're the smart ones, with good grades, who can get away with slacking off from time to time. These belong to a special class of people: those who have a God-given right to enjoy their life. The other type...is just a bunch of idiots."

After the closing ceremony, it was time for our final homeroom of the semester. Under the cool, commanding glare of the Venomous Queen (AKA Sumire), the rest of the room crackled with tension. You wouldn't think we were hours away from summer vacation.

Sumire snapped her teacher's cane against the blackboard. "If you think you're one of the winners, then by all means go ahead and enjoy yourselves to your hearts' content. But remember this: if you indulge in hedonistic pleasure to the point of neglecting what's important, you'll pay for it later. It'll come back to bite you next year, during your university entrance exams."

Wiser words may never have been spoken. I hoped Murasaki Shikibu-sensei was listening.

"May you all stay strong against the frivolous temptations of summer vacation. That is all. Homeroom is adjourned."

"St-Stand! Bow!"

Sumire's words ended just as the bell rang. The student on duty hurriedly stood up and gave the closing orders, not wanting to fall out of favor with our terrifying superior officer. After briefly observing her soldiers bowing before her, Kageishi Sumire turned on her heel and clacked assuredly out of the classroom.

I heard some students saying that they wanted to cancel a couple plans here and there to make sure they had time to study. Sumire's speech must have worked. Either that, or today's students were more studious than I realized. Whichever it was, it was a surprisingly sensible reaction from my peers.

If only they saw the message that showed up in the group chat at that very moment.

Murasaki Shikibu-sensei: YEAAAAAH SUMMER
VACATION!!!!!! BEACH TIME!!!!!!!!!! LET'S GO ALL
OUT!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

She must've sent it the moment she set foot outside the classroom.

"I've said it before and I'll say it again. She is a *super* good actor."

"I bet these guys'd faint if they found out what she was really like," Ozu agreed.

Ozu and I exchanged a wry glance. The real Kageishi Sumire was lazy, spoiled, alcohol-obsessed, and didn't know what a vacuum cleaner was for. The reason she played such a venomous character at school was because she didn't want the students or other teachers to think they could walk all over her.

Having said that, she was excellent at getting her students to perform. Our class got the best average grade in the latest finals out of every class in the year (excluding the advanced class). In the midterms, the increase in our average grade was even higher than that of the advanced class.

Of course, the monstrous Kageishi Midori was still our school's top student, somehow managing to get full points in every single subject. However, some of the top students in our class had joined the higher, crowded ranks of the advanced class. For the mock university entrance tests, they were scoring well above the required grade for their chosen schools.

There was no doubt about Sumire's skills as a teacher. You only needed to look at the leaps and bounds in our class' grades since the start of the year to see it. Of course, apart from math, she didn't teach any of our subjects, but the pressure she put on us and the inspirational philosophies she shared during homeroom likely had a good influence.

"Being a teacher really suits her, huh? Shame she doesn't like it."

"She's super smart too. Probably runs in the family, seeing how her sister's top of her year."

"Midori-san, huh? I know she's technically smart, but you wouldn't be able to tell just by talking to her. You seem much smarter than her to be honest, Ozu."

"Trust me, I'm not. I can do math, English, and science, but that's about it." Ozu chuckled.

Ozu was way too smart for someone who was supposed to be the same age as me. Every new program he developed worked like an absolute charm. Like he said, though, his specialization was in the sciency subjects. When it came to the humanities (apart from English), he was useless.

His Japanese reading comprehension seemed to grow as his communication skills did, but he still had a hard time understanding others. That was exactly why he needed me and the 05th Floor Alliance. If Ozu knew how to deal with people, he could achieve greatness all by himself. I'd be proud of him if he grew enough not to

need us anymore, but I'd also be a little sad.

"Anyway, Kageishi-san really is something. Imagine getting straight As in both the midterms *and* the finals. It's gotta be more than just genetics. I'm bettin' a whole ton of blood, sweat, and tears went into those results."

"I guess once she knows what she wants, she just goes for it. Personally, I'm not willing to bet my entire future on my grades, since I know grades don't decide everything in life. I do have to say it's pretty admirable, being able to dedicate your whole life to a single aspect of it."

"Yeah. Oh, speaking of Kageishi-san, did you wanna invite the drama club to the beach?"

"Ah..."

In helping the drama club to succeed in the National Drama Fair, we ended up getting pretty close to them. We even started inviting them and their leader, Midori, to the Alliance's gatherings and events.

"I did ask them about it, but they didn't want in," I explained.

"What, really?"

"The prefecturals for the Fair are taking place during the vacation, and if they get through those, they'll go on to the nationals. On top of that, it seems Midori-san's got summer school, so she doesn't have the time to hang out with us. She also told me I should spend some time studying too, and not to mess about all summer."

"Yup, that sure sounds like her. But it's not like *you* to just let her get away with an excuse like that."

"You think? Listen, if I thought she was really itching to go to the beach but was holding back for some reason, I'd force her to come with us. But, in her case, it sounded like she actually *wanted* to study. I don't know why she wants to, but..."

"But what?"

"Murasaki Shikibu-sensei said she didn't want to spend too much time with her sister if she could help it. Her secret's more likely to come out if they spend more and more time together."

"Ah! Good point."

"If it was just one of our regular parties, it'd probably be fine. Pour her a few drinks and that royal persona's out the window. No one'd ever realize it was the same person."

She couldn't drink on the beach, though. Not to mention she was the one who'd be driving us there. If Midori met a sober Murasaki Shikibu-sensei, she'd make the connection for sure.

"Gotcha. Welp, I don't mind, since it means Iroha'll have less rivals to—"

Slam!

Before Ozu could finish his sentence, there was a loud crash. It

was so loud I was surprised the classroom doors were still in one piece by the end of it. I turned to find a female student standing stock still at the door. Her face was downcast, and she was muttering something under her breath. The ends of her hair were in a mess, her cheeks were pale, and her uniform was covered in creases. She looked very much like a tramp who'd given up on life and, coincidentally, a lot like Kageishi Midori, who we were just talking about. In fact, I was eighty-eight percent sure that it was her.

"That is Midori-san...right?"

"Speak of the devil, huh? There's something off about her, though," Ozu said.

We both agreed it was her. I just couldn't wrap my head around how super-meticulous, super-serious, and super-fussy Midori could end up looking like that.

"H-Hey. What's—"

"...vable..."

"Huh?"

"Un...givable..." Midori swerved towards us, her gaze fixed on the floor.

It was only now that I realized she held a knife in her right hand.

"...givable... Unforgi..."

She came one step closer. Then another. This didn't look good, but I found myself stuck to my chair as the seconds ticked down to my impending doom.

"Wh-What's the matter, Midori-san? Say something! Uh, but say it over there! Don't come any closer! Uh—"

"Utterly unforgivable! I ought to cut you where you stand! I've never met a more shameless director!"

"AAAAAAAH!"

Midori's head snapped up and her eyes gleamed murderously as she swung the knife down. Thinking fast, I grabbed a folder from my desk and covered my head with it to stop the blade. The tip of the knife bent sideways against the plastic like a gummy worm.

"A prop, huh? Wanna explain what's going on now?"

"You're a liar!"

"Huh? Why am I a liar? First you come and wave that knife at me, and now you're throwing accusations around?"

"You said there was nothing between you and my sister!" Midori's bloodshot eyes glared at me dangerously as she thrust her phone in my face.

On the screen was a LIME group chat named "Kageishi."

Sumire: I am currently dating one of my students, Ooboshi Akiteru-kun, with a view to getting married.

Legally, we cannot be married right now, however he graduates in a year and a half. May I ask you to wait until then?

“Midori-san?!” I gasped, clutching at my hair. “What the heck is this?!”

I already knew Sumire was going to tell her family about “us” to avoid her dad picking a marriage partner for her. That wasn’t the issue here.

The problem was elsewhere on the screen.

This “Kageishi” group had “99+” members. At least a hundred. This wasn’t just Sumire’s immediate family. It must have had cousins, uncles, aunts, and so on. Midori was (obviously) in the group too. No wonder she was mad.

Now what?

I could always just tell her the truth...or not. If I told her why Sumire and I were close enough for me to be her fake fiancé, then the risk of Midori working out Murasaki Shikibu-sensei’s true identity shot up. This situation called for doubling-down.

Sorry, Midori!

“I *knew* your relationship with Sumire was more intimate than you let out! Unbelievable! You should be ashamed of yourself!”

“Why?” I asked in a low voice and looked her straight in the eye. “Sumire and I have planned our future together. We’re serious about each other, and I’m not going to sit here and let you try and shame us for it!”

“I... I...”

“We’re in love; what’s so bad about that? We love each other from the bottom of our hearts, and we’re going to get married. What gives you the right to criticize us? Tell me—and look me in the eye when you do, Midori-san.”

“Ooboshi-kun...”

I’d turned the tables. I lowered my voice to give a firm but gentle ring to it, and to make me sound like a man of virtue. I thought I did a pretty good job, and it was all thanks to my activities with Iroha and the drama club.

“Very well. I accept that I have no right to stand in the way of true love.”

“Well said. So try to lay off the insults, okay? If possible, I’d like us to have your blessing,” I said quietly.

“But... But...” Midori took a step back and shook her head vigorously. The next moment I found her phone in my face again. “In that case, how do you explain...*this*?!”

It was immediately clear what I was looking at.

“These dirty pictures of my sister?!”

I stared. “...What?”

Midori had squeezed her eyes shut and was red up to the tips of her ears. On the screen was a photo of Kageishi Sumire. Her cheeks were caved in on themselves and she was sucking desperately at something cut off by the bottom of the shot.

Midori flicked to the next photo. There was Sumire making a peace sign at the camera, a white liquid dripping from one corner of her mouth. She flicked to the next snap which showed Sumire with both her hands in a peace sign and me next to her making the same gesture. That white liquid was still on the corner of her mouth.

My hands must have been shaking when I took those pictures, because the backgrounds and details were blurred, making them look even *more* indecent.

“Y-Y-You can’t tell me this *isn’t* an indecent image!”

“Wait! Wait! Hold up! What even is this?!”

This made no sense.

“Where did you get these? They’re shopped, right? I don’t remember—”

Wait. I *did* remember these photos.

“My sister sent them herself! Look!”

Sumire: I understand you might not believe that my boyfriend actually exists, so I’m sending some photos of us on a date together. These should show you just how deep our relationship goes.

So it was Sumire who leaked these! The betrayal stung sharper than any thorn.

I knew the moment I took the photos that they were crappy, but I hadn’t prepared myself for them to be *this* bad—and in more ways than one. How could I have snapped such pervy pictures without even realizing it?

“As far as I’m concerned, this is too ‘deep’! You’re a minor! This is wrong! It’s illegal!” Midori cried.



“Sumire-sensei’s the one who’d be in trouble with the law, since she’s the adult.”

“I don’t need your excuses! It’s time for your execution!”

“Get that gummy knife away from me!”

The soft material didn’t hurt, but each strike of that fake knife was mentally draining. My classmates were turning to look at the poor guy being attacked by our year’s top student. Even considering the fact that most of the class had gone home by now, having that many pairs of eyes on me was almost unbearable. To think they spent most of their time ignoring me, but *now* they were interested.

I guess I was getting used to attention like this since I started fake-dating Mashiro, but even then I spent most of my days out of the spotlight. At this rate, I was going to lose the efficiency of being in an environment where I was mostly ignored. I’d get curious glances day after day instead! In the worst-case scenario, I’d be forever treated like the bastard (or the hero) who took indecent photos with our teacher.

“We just went to get some bubble tea together. She was just sucking hard because her drink was 99% tapioca. There’s nothing dirty about it!”

“You don’t think much of me, do you? I *know* what this is! It’s bukkake, right?!”

“H-Hey, don’t just spring industry lingo on us! Are you secretly a pervert or something?”

“N-No! There were some guys in my class who were like: ‘You’re smart, right? Could you explain what’s going on here?’ Then they showed me this video of some naked blonde girl and all this stuff was happening to her...but basically that word was in the tags!”

“You must’ve looked up the meaning of the word afterwards though, right? I mean, you used it correctly and totally naturally.”

“Hnnngh!” Midori’s face grew redder and redder before my eyes.

“Besides, aren’t you a little too obsessed with your sister’s love life? She’s already twenty-five. She was bound to end up dating someone eventually, even if it wasn’t me.”

“I-I know that, but...”

“Your family was even looking for a marriage partner for her. If it weren’t for me, she’d be getting married much sooner.”

“Hnnnngh—Wait.”

“What?”

“I don’t actually feel that mad when I imagine Sumire marrying someone my family picked out for her...”

“So you hate me especially?”

Midori was grateful to me after I helped save the drama club, and I didn’t remember doing anything to get on her bad side. Plus, they

even made it to the prefecturals of the Fair thanks to Iroha and I taking over the main roles. Of course, we weren't planning to interfere with their efforts anymore, but the entire club had had nothing but gratitude for the Alliance after we got them through the qualifiers. Midori included.

"I-I don't *hate* you, but when I heard you were dating my sister, my mind just went blank and...huh?"

"What's wrong?"

Midori frowned and tilted her head to one side. "Wh-Who exactly am I jealous of here?"

"Hey, you okay? First you come in here with a knife and now you're getting confused. Are you sure you're the top student in our year?"

"I-I'm fine! I'm healthy as a horse!"

Nope, there was definitely something wrong with her. She wasn't even getting mad at my dig at her. It was like her brain wasn't working fast enough to register that I just insulted her, which wasn't normal for her. Concerned, I placed my hand on her forehead.

"You're being weird. You got a fever or something?"

"Eep!"

Sssssssssss!

"Whoa! You're burning up! Your brain cells are probably dying of heat stroke!"

"O-Ooboshi-kun! Y-You're touching... Aaaaaah!"

"This is bad. Help me get her to the nurse's room, Ozu."

"Uh, I think she's fine."

"You serious? She's burning up hotter than a grilling grovel hotplate! She needs to lie down right away!" I stood up to let her lean on my shoulders.

Midori squealed and batted my hand away. She then took several steps back and glared at me like I was a heinous criminal. "N-No! You're a rude, insensitive brute! I-I can't..."

"What are you talking about? C'mon, let me take you to—"

"S-Stay away from me! This is wrong... These feelings... I can't..." Midori backed away slowly until her back collided with the classroom door. She squeezed her eyes shut and took a deep breath. "It's IMPOSSIBLE!"

She yelled as loudly as if she was in a stage production, then raced out of the classroom. I'd give her a round of applause for her performance, if only it weren't genuine. Or maybe it was part of her practice?

"I wonder if she really is okay. I just hope she doesn't push herself too much and makes herself sick."

"She'll be fine. I'm sure with every step she takes, her temperature

drops another 0.1 degrees.”

“The heck does that mean?”

“I’m saying you’re the source of her fever.”

“She hates me so much I’m making her sick? That kinda hurts...”

“Aaand you get a big, fat zero for your lack of empathy.”

Why was Ozu grading me? Was it because I somehow made Midori hate me so much that she ran away? I gave him a questioning glance.

Ozu chuckled. “Welp. I guess your romantic comedy lifestyle wouldn’t be as entertaining if you weren’t so dense.”

“What are you on about now? Oh, right! Speaking of romantic comedies... Mashiro! Since it’s the last day of school, wanna act like an actual couple and walk home together?” I turned to Mashiro’s seat.

It was already empty.

“Tsukinomori-san left as soon as homeroom ended. Didn’t even say bye to anyone.”

“Huh. That’s odd.”

Ever since she upped the ante on our “relationship,” she would always come and ask me to walk her home after class. So far, I had been too busy with recordings and sorting out documents to say yes, so I thought I’d give her the chance on the last day of school at least, in case people started doubting our relationship.

“I guess she’s busy, which would explain why she was so beat today. Take care of her, yeah? You *are* her boyfriend, after all.”

“Quit teasing me.”

Mashiro was acting weird. If she was caught up in some kind of trouble again, I wanted to help her if I could.

Just then, I felt a vibration in my pocket.

“Which girl’s messaging you this time?”

“Huh? Oh, it’s just Otoi-san.”

“‘Just’ Otoi-san? That’s kinda rude.”

“Yeah, I guess.”

I didn’t really see her as a girl, to be honest. I saw her in a similar way to Ozu, or as a reliable business partner rather than anything else. Her gender didn’t really play a part in our relationship, and I’d feel kind of bad if it did.

Otoi: Come to the studio. Let’s talk.

It was a simple message complete with everything she wanted me to know. It was rare for Otoi-san to ask me to meet up though. Since she was asking me this time, I probably didn’t need to bring any candy for her, so I decided to swing by on my way home.

Otoi: Get me some bubble tea too.

I was overcome with an odd sense of déjà vu.

“Damn, this is great. Really sweet. Y’know, I never tried it before ‘cause the line was always stupidly long, but I’m thinkin’ maybe it’d be worth it once in a while.”

“Worth making me line up for you, right? Sorry, but I’ll pass.”

Otoi-san was happily sipping away at the bubble milk tea I spent twenty minutes lining up for under the blazing sun. I already knew my objections would fall on deaf ears (it’s not like a slave has rights) but hey, it was worth a try.

It was two in the afternoon, and I was in the basement of Otoi-san’s house, which had been remodeled as a recording studio. Thanks to the air conditioner, the air was ice cold. Each clack of the keyboard bounced off the walls.

With all of its fancy, cutting-edge recording equipment, this place was Otoi-san’s castle within her own home. Her parents were rich, high-ranking government officials, and Otoi-san’s allowance was nothing to sniff at. On top of that, they had income from investments, which they used to buy Otoi-san the equipment she wanted.

Otoi-san could carry out her sound work just fine without being part of the Alliance, so she wasn’t an official member. She was more like an outside partner who supported our activities. I’d known her since junior high school. She was the only other person who knew about Iroha’s true identity as the “Phantom Voice Troupe,” and she hadn’t said a word to any members of the Alliance.

Ozu and the others knew that Otoi-san helped with the sound stuff, so they were acquainted, but to protect Iroha’s secret, I never let them get too close. Iroha recently outed her acting talents when she had to step in for the heroine at the National Drama Fair, but she still hadn’t told anyone that she was the sole voice actor for *Koyagi*. I wouldn’t put it past someone as perceptive as Ozu to have figured it out by now though.

Anyway, before the Fair, it was only Otoi-san and me who knew about Iroha’s secret, so I guess you could call Otoi-san my co-conspirator.

“How is it? Honestly speaking?”

“Hm?” Otoi-san hummed absentmindedly, still tapping away at her keyboard. “You wanna know what I’m doin’? Hold on and you’ll find out.”

“No, I meant *that*.” I pointed at Otoi-san’s chest.

Wait, I should probably rephrase that. I wasn’t interested in her

boobs, I was interested in the cup of bubble tea that sat atop them.

Since Otoi-san was busy typing, she didn't have a hand free. She was therefore using the ample breasts that pushed out against the fabric of her uniform as a secure drinks holder. All she needed to do was pull her jaw in a little, and she could sip from the straw.



"I don't think that's how you're supposed to drink it."

"Loads a people drink it like this. There are pictures all over the net."

"That was a meme, not a serving suggestion. And people weren't sharing it for the bubble tea."

"Hey, if it works, it works." Otoi-san took another sip.

It was kind of fascinating how the weight of the cup pushed down against her breasts and created a dip. I forced myself to look away.

"Anyway, you didn't call me over just because you wanted some bubble tea, right?" I asked, trying to distract myself (and her) from the instincts rising up inside me.

Ever since I showed up and passed her the tea, Otoi-san hadn't stopped working on her computer.

"I'm still settin' up. Gimme a sec. You can go play in the corner if you're bored."

"I'm not your kid nephew or something, you know. You could at least explain."

"Naw. Too much effort."

"Seriously?"

"I'm sure we got toys in the shed if you wanna go look. Pick whatever you want, yeah?"

"No thanks."

"I mean, we probably got adult toys too."

"As if I'm gonna use those at someone else's house!"

"Nothin' to be ashamed of. That stuff's normal for boys your age."

"What are you, my mom?!"

At least she was being open-minded, I guess? Still, doing that kinda thing at someone else's house, and with someone else's "equipment," was more than perverted. It was totally degenerate!

I looked around the studio for anything to distract from the outrageous image she'd planted in my mind.

"Huh?"

It was then that I noticed the low table. On it was a small brown bowl stuffed with snacks, either for Iroha and me when we came by, or for Otoi-san to have by herself. I'd seen that bowl a million times before. It was the unfamiliar items next to it which bothered me.

"Are you going on vacation?" I picked up the guidebook, which contained information about different destinations within Japan.

I flicked through it. A few of the pages were marked with yellow post-it notes.

"Uh, I wouldn't call it a vacation. I just wanted to go somewhere for the summer to escape the heat," Otoi-san said, her fingers still flying across the keyboard.

“You going to the five lakes of Fuji?”

“Don’t even go there.”

“Huh?!”

Right. I’d accidentally hit on one of her sensitive subjects again.

“You’ve been triggerin’ me too much lately. You gotta be more careful.”

“If you told me what the pattern was, maybe I could actually avoid those topics. Just a hint’ll do, or a list of words.”

“Nope. Just avoid them.”

“That’s insane!”

She left me with no choice but to add an entry to the ever-growing list. I did just that, secretly adding “the five lakes of Fuji” on my phone.

Anyway, sensitive topics aside, I was more interested in her trying to escape the sun.

“I never pinned you as someone interested in travel, especially since you turned down our invitation to the beach.”

“I burn like anythin’ on the beach. Plus, studyin’ goes quicker when you do it alone.”

“Studying?”

“Wait, didn’t I tell you?” Otoi-san stopped typing and slumped back in her chair to look at me. “I’ve started studyin’ song writin’ and composition.”

“Really?”

“Yup. I can mix up any sound if I’ve already got it, but I’m bad at comin’ up with stuff from scratch. I wanna learn how to do that too, though.”

Otoi-san told me before that she was self-conscious when it came to certain aspects of her abilities. She needed other talents, like Iroha, to work with; she couldn’t become a pianist, or a violinist, or a singer by her own strengths. She was limited to a love of sound, the knowledge to back it up, her editing skills, and her own intuition. Otoi-san wasn’t a creative type; she was the type to support somebody else from the shadows.

“I always thought I was happy with what I could do. Guess I blame you and y’r team for makin’ me wanna create somethin’ by myself.”

“What, you? But you’re so lazy! You only engage your brain for like, an hour a day! You’re practically a sloth, and—”

“You makin’ fun of me? You’re a real pain in the ass, y’know.”

“S-Sorry. I was just surprised.”

“Anyway, ’s hard to focus here. With all this equipment around me, I end up doin’ other stuff.”

“I get you. So you wanna go somewhere with no distractions.”

“Yup. Go up north somewhere, all by myself. I’ll bring some books, some music, and study. I wanna try ’n’ build up the kinda sensitive nature I need to write lyrics and music.”

“Huh.”

There was real passion in her eyes. When I told her she took me by surprise, I meant it. When we met back in junior high, she had already given up on her own abilities. This wasn’t a case where she was forced to give up on her talents because of her circumstances. She always said she didn’t have any talent to start with, and that it was impossible for that to change. She avoided growth like the plague.

I thought that was a good thing. Everyone has stuff they’re suited for and stuff they’re not. Forcing yourself to pursue something you aren’t suited for’s a waste of time; time you could be spending on pursuing something you *are* good at, and making yourself happy.

That was what I was doing. Picking out talent that impressed me, and dedicating everything to supporting it. I thought Otoi-san was like me. I thought that was why we understood each other. But perhaps there was a passion inside her, a passion to pursue something she wasn’t suited for. In that case, I wanted to support her as best I could.

“Do your best, Otoi-san.”

“Yup, I will. I hope you’ll be there with more candy if it all goes to shit. And if I do good, I hope you’ll be there with more candy as a reward.”

“Sounds like I’m gonna be out of pocket either way.”

“Yup. Oh, I’m done.” Otoi-san brought her hand down on the enter key. “I called you here ’cause I wanna show you this.”

“A video?”

There was a picture of Iroha recording her lines on the monitor, side-by-side with an image of a classic anime character. There was a play button in the middle of the screen, meaning this was probably a video file.

“I threw this together just now. Somethin’ about it was buggin’ me, so I wanted to get your opinion.”

“Isn’t this anime almost twenty years old or so? It was on a streaming service at some point.”

“Just listen to this.”

“Sure.”

Otoi-san waited for me to put on the headphones she handed to me before clicking the play button.

“I’m ready. I’m gonna put on the best performance I can for you, Senpai!”

Iroha’s image was highlighted on the screen, and her goody-two-shoes voice flowed through the headphones. I remembered this recording session. Iroha wasn’t working from a script; instead she was

talking about her passion for voice-acting. I was surprised Otoi-san kept the data.

Why's she making me listen to this?

As I kept watching, Iroha's side of the screen fell into shadow, and this time the anime character was highlighted.

"Okay, I am ready! I'm going to do my best not to let my senpai down!"

It sounded incredibly similar to Iroha's line and tone just now. I didn't know Iroha was doing dubbing work. After that, both sides lit up, and Iroha and the character spoke at the same time. Their voices were a perfect match. The sweet, docile sound of their voices in unison soothed my eardrums.

When the video was finished, Otoi-san let go of the bubble tea straw in her mouth and looked at me. "Well?"

"Well what? Iroha's doing dubbing now?"

"What? You're the producer, and you don't know?"

I stared and waited for her to continue.

"Kohinata isn't dubbin' anythin'. This is the character's original voice."

"Huh?!" My voice came out a pitch higher than normal.

This was a twenty-year-old anime character with the same voice as Iroha. It was clear what this meant.

"Iroha's already a professional voice actor?!"

"You a professional moron? This anime's from before she was born."

"Oh. Right."

"Yep. So how was she s'posed to do a voice for it?"

"Good point, but then what *does* this mean?"

"Beats me. I caught a marathon of this show by chance the other day, which was when I noticed it. Thought it sounded jus' like when Kohinata was doin' her Princess Perfect voice that one time. So I compared the voices, and...well, rest's history."

"They sound exactly the same."

"You got it. Yeah, and—tch. I'm outta tea." Otoi-san detached her mouth from the straw.

She pushed the cup deeper into her chest before letting go and using her boobs as a loaded springboard to send the cup flying into the trash can at her feet.

How did she do that?

Mixing sounds clearly wasn't the only talent she had. I was tempted to say something, but decided to get back to more important matters instead.

"Say this is an actress who's got a really close voice to Iroha. Maybe Iroha could use her previous works to improve her own

performance.”

“Yup. ’S what I was thinkin’. So I did some more diggin’.”

Otoi-san started typing on her keyboard again and ran a quick search. The results showed a list of voice actors who worked in anime. She clicked through to one of the links, showing more details on that particular actor.

“This is Otohama Chia. Says she started voice actin’ as a kid. Apparently, she could play all sorta roles, and you’d never know it was her till the credits. She wasn’t much of a public figure either, so people used to say it was a buncha different actors usin’ the same name.”

“Wait, but that’s—”

“Just like Kohinata, right? I thought so too.”

I never expected to come across another actor quite like Iroha, let alone one *this* similar. In fact, this Otohama Chia person might be able to show us what Iroha was destined for in the future.

“What’s this actor doing now, then?” I asked excitedly.

Otoi-san’s eyes softened slightly. “You really are passionate when it comes to Kohinata, huh? I gotta say, I like that about you though.”

“Uh, thanks. Guess I’ll take that as a compliment.”

“Anyway, sorry to get your hopes up. It’s like she disappeared completely after this.”

“What?”

“She retired from voice actin’ when she was still young. Looks like she went into stage actin’ or the movies or somethin’. No idea if she made it big though. I guess only the people workin’ with her know what happened to her, ’cause she didn’t end up in any magazines or anythin’ after that.”

“She quit voice acting, huh?”

“Well, she was in live-action dramas and stuff as a kid. Maybe she just wanted to give voice actin’ a try but never thought of it as a long-term thing.”

“I guess that kind of thing comes down to personal preference.”

I couldn’t help but feel disappointed. If only she were still working, I’d do everything in my power to gather as much information about her as possible to help launch Iroha’s full career.

“There is somethin’ that kinda bugged me though,” Otoi-san continued.

“What’s that?”

“The fans used to call her the ‘Technicolor Voice’ and the ‘Godlike Voice’ and stuff like that, but there were loadsa people in the industry who criticized her. Might just be gossip though, I dunno.”

Otoi-san clicked on some old articles which, just as she said, were about anonymous voices in the industry criticizing Otohama Chia. A

lot of them said she wasn't as talented as everyone thought, and that those who really praised her didn't know the first thing about voice acting.

"You don't think these guys were just jealous?"

"Dunno. My point was more that, if Kohinata breaks into voice actin' for real, this might be the kinda stuff she has to deal with."

"I...guess. But why does it matter?"

If people wanted to criticize her, they should feel free. Iroha was just being herself and living her best life. If that made people say bad stuff about her, then so be it. Those weren't the ones Iroha was acting for.

"I believe in Iroha's talent, and I'm gonna support her no matter what anyone says. I already decided on that ages ago."

"Okay." Otoi-san gave me a solid thump on the small of my back. "You pass."

"That was a test?"

"Well, it wasn't gonna be. I just thought that, if you're gonna stick by Kohinata no matter what, she'll be fine." A small smile appeared on Otoi-san's lips.

I think I understand now...

Recently, Iroha worked up the courage to display her talents in front of the world for the very first time. Though I didn't think she could spill the beans to her mom, Otohara, or reveal herself as the Phantom Voice Troupe to the other Alliance members yet, getting up on stage like that was a step in the right direction.

The more she performed like that, the more attention she would garner from the world and from those in the industry, which increased the likelihood of criticism. Seeing all these articles about this other voice actor probably made Otoi-san realize that.

"Thanks for worrying about her, Otoi-san."

"S fine. You don't hafta thank me for somethin' so small. I kinda see Kohinata as my daughter, if y'know what I mean."

"If you're her mom, I guess that makes me her dad then. Makes sense, since I feel like I spend way too much of my time off trying to keep her out of my hair. I mean, kids are annoying, right?"

"You're lucky I'm not gonna tell her y'said that."

"Don't worry. I tell her she's annoying all the time."

"Not what I meant. Listen, if I'm her mom, and you're her dad, then...ugh, this is a pain in the ass to explain. It's gonna take more than two sentences at least, so I'm done."

"Hey, I actually wanted to know what you meant."

"All I'm sayin' is, you're so dense you might wanna watch out for the wrecking ball that's gonna come an' knock you down one day. You're a cookie-cutter harem protagonist after all."

“Even *you’re* calling me that now?!”

I always thought she was the one person on my side!

Despite the shock to my system, Otoi-san and I hung out for a little while longer.

And so, the last day of the semester came to an end, and the warm, fun, troubling days of the Alliance’s summer began...

“I finally figured it out after all these years.”

“Figured what out, Ozu?”

“Y’know how Otoi-san never stops eating sugar? So how come she’s not fat?”

“Good question.”

“I bet it’s ’cause all the calories are going to only one part of her body.”

“Oh?”

“Those calories created a special drinks holder for her, allowing her to keep drinking high-calorie trash like bubble tea, which then makes that drinks holder even stronger. It’s a vicious cycle. A vicious, mammary cycle.”

“I dunno how you can say something so dumb with a straight face...”



Canary

It's Canary-chan! I'm at UZA editorial now, chirp!



Canary

It's Canary-chan! I'm on the train now, chirp!



Canary

It's Canary-chan! I'm at the station now, chirp!



Canary

It's Canary-chan! I'm downstairs at your apartment building now, chirp!!



Canary

It's Canary-chan! I'm right outside a certain Namako-sensei's door now, chirp!!



Makigai Namako

I'm not letting you in...



Canary

When's your deadline?



Makigai Namako

Uh...



Canary

When's your deadline?



Makigai Namako

D-Don't tell me you remember every missed deadline?!



Canary

April 30, May 31, June 30, July 31



Makigai Namako

Wait! I haven't missed the last one!



Canary

So you'll be done by the 31st?



Makigai Namako

...



Canary

I'll be the judge of that once I've seen your progress, chirp!



Makigai Namako

Wait, why can I hear the door unlocking?



Makigai Namako

When did you get a key to my apartment?!



Canary

GIMME UPDATES



Makigai Namako

AAAAAAAAAAAAAAH!

Chapter 5: The Beach Has It In for Our Timely Arrival

“There are four minutes and twenty-three seconds until we’re due to leave. Hurry up, maggots!”

It was the final day of July. There wasn’t a cloud in the bright blue sky as the sun blazed down on us. Ozu was brandishing a teacher’s cane and shouting orders at Iroha, Sumire, and me while we were packing the car with the stuff we needed for the trip. We had swimming rings, boards, beach balls, parasols, sunglasses, a case with our swimwear in it, and sandals with soles that were way too high.

In case you’re wondering about that last one, Sumire said she needed them to give off the impression that she was a way taller and more intimidating woman than she was, because otherwise the surfer boys might try and pick her up and assault her in the shadows of the cliffs.

Or, to give a shorter explanation, she was an idiot.

We were drenched in sweat as Ozu worked us like slaves. I paused behind the car as Sumire leaned in to whisper to me.

“Is it just me, or is Ozuma-kun acting weird?”

“You think so?”

“Yeah! He’s supposed to be the handsome, kindhearted, princely type! Why is he hazing us like we just joined the OZ special forces?”

“Well, he still looks and sounds like the class prince we all know and love.”

“That’s why it’s terrifying! He called us maggots like he was complimenting our hair!”

“Wait, you don’t know, do you? This is how he is when you ask him to take care of something. He cares more about scheduling and timetables than I do. You should count yourself lucky that I’m so patient with your deadlines, or you’d have him to deal with.”

“Wh-Why? What if he was in charge of getting the illustrations from me?”

“He’d get those drawings from you by any means. He’d make my methods look like I was fooling around.”

“Th-That’s news to me. I didn’t know there was a secret boss fight lurking behind you...”

“Stop shit-talking over there.” Ozu cracked the cane against the ground.

“Eeek! He swore with a smile on his face! Aaah!”

“I can hear you. Look, I’ve calculated the best schedule for us, based on how long till mom gets home, how crowded the beach is gonna be, and how much time we should spend fooling around to have the most fun possible—among other stuff. Took all night. I just don’t want all my hard work to go to waste. Is that so bad?”

“Sir, no, sir! Not bad at all, sir!” Sumire gave a hearty salute.

“His calculations are perfect too,” I explained, glancing back at her. “We’re guaranteed not to get stuck in traffic if we follow his route. Okay, that’s the last of my stuff in.”

I grabbed the towel from around my neck and wiped the sweat from my face.

Ozu crossed his arms and gave an approving nod. “Hell, I like you. You can come over to my house and fuck my sister.”

“No thanks.” And when did Ozu become an American drill sergeant?

“C’mon, Ozuma. This is Senpai we’re talking about. He doesn’t know how to do that kinda stuff.” Said sister Iroha suddenly appeared behind me.

She was wearing a sporty, short-sleeved T-shirt complete with a miniskirt. Standard fashionable attire for any high school girl in summer. Just like when she hung out in my room, she had that pair of headphones around her neck. Without fear of her mom catching sight of her, Iroha was free to express herself entirely as she wanted for this trip.

Iroha grinned, grinding her fingertip against my cheek. “If either of us is gonna do the fucking, it’s gonna be me!”

“If any of your classmates heard you say that word with that smile, they’d throw a fit.”

Hey, guys. The representative of your entire year who gave such a wonderful speech at the closing ceremony and is such a perfect little honor student just said “fucking.”

Reality can be soul-destroying.

“Who cares? It’s not like we’re at school right now! Why do I gotta be all super serious when we’re just hanging out like this?”

“I guess. But you should still be careful, even though it’s summer vacation. Don’t forget you’ve got homework.”

“I won’t! My grades are top-notch, y’know! Better than yours, anyway.”

“Unfortunately, you’re right.”

Kohinata Iroha was top of her year, which was also why she was chosen to give a speech at the ceremony. She came in top in the end-of-term tests too, making her the envy of all her classmates.

“When did you even get so smart?” I asked.

"I was born this way, baby!"

"Liar. You were pretty average in junior high school, right? D'you know how shocked I was to hear you actually got into our high school?"

Academically, our school was above average, and most of its students had their sights on going to college after graduation. Most of the time my classmates and the people I hung out with looked like nothing more than a bunch of primates, but I promise that a lot of them are good at studying at least. That was why the top student in our year, Midori, and the top student in the first grade, Iroha, actually compared pretty well on a national scale. You could even justify calling them prodigies.

"It's 'cause you helped me study! You did the entrance exam yourself, so I basically got insider knowledge on how to pass from you. Where would I be without such a gullible—I mean, helpful—Senpai?"

"I heard that."

"Whatever, just make sure you work hard this year too! I need to leech off your success!" Iroha gave me a hearty pat on the back, which I really could've done without.

"What are you on about, Iroha? Didn't you study really hard because you wanted to get into the same school as A—"

"Aaah! Stop right there!" Iroha shoved whatever was in her hands into Ozu's mouth. "You can't go around spillin' all your sister's secrets!"

"Hey, Iroha-chan! That's *my* bag!" Sumire protested.

"Wh-Why is that a secret?!" Ozu gasped once his mouth was free. "Why don't you just make a move already? This'll be your chance to get ahead of Tsukinomori-san."

"It's none of your business! Let me do things at my own pace, yeah?" Iroha pouted and turned her face away from her brother.

It was rare to see them quarrel like that. I wasn't even sure what they were arguing about.

"Oh." Iroha's face fell. "It's a shame Mashiro-senpai can't make it. Do you really think she'll be okay with not coming?"

"I asked her a hundred times if she was sure."

"She said the beach is too busy, but I swear she was looking forward to it before."

That's right. There were only four of us here: me, Iroha, Sumire, and Ozu. Makigai Namako-sensei wasn't here because he's Makigai Namako-sensei. Mashiro was supposed to be coming with us, but yesterday she called to say she couldn't all of a sudden.

"I'm sorry. I was looking forward to going, and I was gonna go, but..." I could still hear the sad tone in her voice from that phone call.

"I...can't go anymore. I think I'm gonna be busy all summer..."

I asked her why several times, but she wouldn't tell me. All she did was apologize. I even knocked on her door, Room 501, but she didn't respond. I didn't know whether she was ignoring me or if she was out, but I couldn't get in touch with her after our phone call.

"What about leaving her alone? I thought you woulda forced her to join," Iroha said.

"What kind of guy do you think I am?"

"It's true. You coulda broken in and kidnapped her or something. Y'know, like a bandit stealing away the young maiden of the village."

Excuse you, Iroha. I'd never resort to such lows...would I? Looking back at my life was making me doubt myself, so I shook away my thoughts and doubled down.

"If she *wanted* to go but couldn't, then I might force her. It sounds to me, though, that Mashiro's decided there's something more important than the beach. That's the feeling I got anyway."

"Senpai..."

I still remembered Mashiro, flopped down on her desk and muttering something about a deadline. If she was talking about a contest for new writers like I thought, then that meant she was giving up the beach to work on pursuing her dream. If coming along meant she would miss the deadline, then that was simply inefficient from the viewpoint that it was delaying her finding happiness.

"To be honest though, I don't know for sure why she turned us down."

"I know, but—gah!"

Iroha was looking up anxiously at the corner room on the fifth floor. She let out a squeak as she was suddenly embraced from behind.

"You're such a good girl, Iroha-chan! All the worrying in the world won't make it so she can come with us. It's better just to let loose and make the most of the trip!"

"Sumire-chan-sensei?"

"It's her fault for turning us down! So let's just have a ton of fun without her!"

"I guess I get it...but Mashiro-senpai's my friend. I can't help but worry a little."

"Oooh, so serious! Such a good girl, Iroha-chan! Here!" Sumire began to ruffle Iroha's hair. She then grinned and gave her a thumbs-up. "Hell, I like you. You can come over to my house and fuck my sister."

"What is this, some kind of sister-fucking cult?" Even Iroha had a limit to how much nonsense she could take.

"Iroha and Sumire-sensei's sister, huh?" I pictured them in my mind.

Sumire's sister, Midori. How would Iroha fuck her? Oh, wait. Two girls meant yuri. In my opinion, yuri is too pure an environment for a filthy word like fuck, but anyway, with Iroha's confidence, she would totally be the top, and she'd push Midori down on the bed before undoing her uniform buttons slowly, one by one, and then hold on where am I going with this? Time to stop. Stop!

Luckily, my sanity was restored by bashing my head against a nearby utility pole a few times.

"Wh-What are you doing, Senpai?"

"Just trying to keep everything PG-13."

"Huh?"



I could practically see the question marks bouncing around her head...but no way in a million years could I tell her the truth!

“Okay, guys, we’re all set! Right on time too! I bet you’re happy about that right, Ozuma-kun?”

While we were messing around, Sumire had finished loading up the car. She closed the door with a bang and puffed out her chest.

Ozu glanced down at his smartwatch and gave a satisfied nod. “Yup. If we leave now, we should be able to stick to the schedule no problem.”

“Then what are we waiting for?! Let’s gooo!” Sumire launched herself into the driver’s seat and pointed behind her with a thumb. She was grinning with all the enthusiasm of a trucker planning a road trip across the entire USA. “Get in, kids. Lemme take you on the highway to heaven.”

Iroha sighed before lowering her voice and grumbling into my ear. “I know she’s a total loser when she’s in Murasaki Shikibu-sensei mode, but this is kinda too much. Does she really not care that Mashiro-senpai can’t come?”

I was surprised to hear Iroha complain like that.

“I guess she just cares about her own fun more than her students’...which, admittedly, makes her a terrible teacher.” I paused. “Well, I guess she *is* a loser, but maybe calling her a terrible teacher is kinda a stretch. I think she might be acting like this for our sake.”

“Whaddya mean?”

“If we’re too worried about Mashiro to enjoy the beach, then the whole trip’d be a waste of time. It’s a shame she couldn’t come with us, but it’d be inefficient to let that hold us back. I think Sumire-sensei’s clowning around to get us to realize we’re allowed to enjoy ourselves. Of course, I think she’s genuinely hyped to go to the beach on top of all of that.”

“Huh. I guess you’re right. That’s the kinda person she is, after all.” Iroha finally smiled again. She scratched at her cheek awkwardly. “Y’know, I’ve been feeling kinda jealous of Mashiro-senpai lately, which might be why I was kinda down. I guess I’m the real loser here, huh? Sorry!”

“Jealous? You guys didn’t fight or anything, right?”

“Like I’m gonna tell a cookie-cutter harem protagonist anything!”

“I was just trying to help...and could you drop the whole harem protagonist thing already?”

“Nope!” Iroha laughed, escaping into the car’s back seat.

One second she’s serious, and the next she’s trying to get on my nerves again...

I followed the whirlwind that was Iroha into the back of the car. I

felt bad for Mashiro, but I didn't want to let Sumire or the others down, so I decided I was gonna enjoy this trip as best I could.

“MOVE IT, LOSERS! MURASAKI SHIKIBU-SENSEI COMING THROUGH!” Sumire yelled, driving her four-wheel drive (which was more style than substance) down the highway, and sticking closely to the speed limit.

I watched the cars pass us one after another out of the right-hand side window. “You’d think you could drive a little faster shouting like that.”

“Shut up! I’m trying to have fun over here!”

“Hey, we just got overtaken by a dinosaur.”

Now and then, you got cars which outright ignored the speed limit. Sumire had all the attitude of a rebel who might be tempted to commit such transgressions, but in all honesty, this was a smooth and comfortable ride. And hey, who was I to complain about her obeying the law, especially when it meant I wasn’t gonna get car sick. If only she’d keep her mouth shut.

“Why are you shouting so much? This isn’t a drag race.”

“Because I really just wanna slam my foot down and go all out!”

“Do it then!”

“No way! We’ll die!”

“Well, then stop shouting!”

“Look, driving is scary! If you run someone over, your life gets messed up, and the lives of your passengers are always in your hands. Just thinking about getting you guys in an accident and taking your futures away sends shivers up my spine!”

“Don’t think then and just drive properly!”

They say that people act overly-confident when they get their hands on a steering wheel, but Sumire was about a hundred times *less* confident. It was great that she was driving safely, but I could do without the boy racer yelling.

“I guess it’s nice you’re giving us a lift at least.” I sighed.

I didn’t want to be ungrateful, so I decided to leave it there, and slumped back against my seat. I didn’t have the right to complain since I wasn’t doing anything helpful. Sumire was driving. Ozu was navigating from the passenger seat. Those two were putting physical and mental energy into getting us to the beach, while Iroha and I were nothing but dead weight in the back.

I glanced at her. She had her headphones on and was tapping her foot to a beat. She must’ve been listening to music through her phone.

That’s an idea.

I put my earphones into my ears, opened up iTunes on my phone,

and picked a sound file to listen to. It was a clip of Otohama Chia's voice work of various anime characters, lifted from the original audio. I asked Otoi-san to make this for me, in exchange for fifty Suckies.

This actress was who Iroha had the potential to become. If I studied her, I might be able to learn something that'd help me become a better director for Iroha. The more I listened, the more this actress sounded just like Iroha, especially when Iroha was in honor student mode. It didn't matter how many times I listened, I just couldn't shake the feeling that Otoi-san had mixed in some of Iroha's voice or something. Funnily enough, when Otohama was playing other characters, it didn't sound anything like Iroha's work. I tried to work out why their "prim and proper" voices sounded so similar, but I just couldn't come up with an answer.

A poke in my side interrupted my thoughts.

"Whaddya listening to, Senpai?"

"Huh? Oh, nothing," I replied half-heartedly.

My listless response only seemed to pique her curiosity, and the next second I found Iroha's face right next to me. "C'mon, I wanna know! Lemme listen too!"

"No. And stop grabbing the cord, idiot!"

"Why not? There are sixty million other guys in this country who would *love* to share headphones with a cute girl like me!"

"That's only 'cause they don't know how annoying you are. Why can't you just listen to your own music?"

"I can listen to *my* music whenever I want! I can only listen to *your* music right now!"

"Hey, those headphones and that phone are all stuff I lent you, so you *can't* listen to it whenever you want, actually."

The phone Iroha used to listen to music was an old model I had taken the SIM card out of when I upgraded. Why didn't she just listen on her own phone? There was too much of a risk of her mom finding out about it. That was why. She didn't dare to listen to music *anywhere* at home.

It might have sounded like she was being paranoid, but ever since I met her mother, Kohinata Otoha, and found out she lived a second life as *President* Amachi Otoha, I realized that Iroha was right to be cautious.

Her mother had the sort of eyes that could see through anything. If you let your guard down around her, she would instantly know exactly what you were hiding from her. That was the only way I could explain those dangerous eyes of hers.

"I've got an annual pass to your apartment. I can swing by whenever I want!"

"My apartment isn't a theme park, it's where I live my life! Ever

heard of manners?"

"I sure have! That's why I only try and come 'round when you're actually in!"

"What, to make my life a living hell?"

"Look, who cares? C'mon, you don't need to be shy! Just pass me an earphone, por favor!"

"D'you ever give up? Fine, have it. But it's really not as exciting as you seem to think."

I didn't have the patience to argue with her further, so I took the right earbud from my ear and made to pass it to Iroha, who looked as eager as a dog at dinner time. But then I stopped.

What would happen if she heard this?

I ran a mental simulation of the worst-case scenario as quickly as I could.

"Huh? Is this a recording of me doing my teacher's pet voice?"

"N-No! I know it sounds just like you, but it's actually a different person altogether—"

"Wait, so you found an anime from twenty years ago just to get a voice that sounded like mine? You really love my voice that much, huh? You can't sleep anymore without my sweet little voice in your ear at night, right?"

"I said no! Listen to me! You've got it all wrong!"

"Wow, you're pretty desperate, huh? You're so cute, Senpai!"

That would be way too embarrassing. I'd never live it down! The very thought of it made me want to punch her in the stomach, even though she hadn't done anything yet!

No. There was no way I could let her listen to this.

"Yes! Tha—huh? Why'd you take it away at the last second?"

"I can't let you listen to this after all."

"What?! You literally were just about to pass it to me!"

"Shut up. I'm not gonna argue with you about this."

"Hmph. I just don't get it." Iroha pouted and was very careful to make sure I saw it.

It didn't matter what face she pulled. I knew it was kind of sneaky to pull the earbud away at the last second, but I wasn't about to change my mind.

"You're trying really hard to keep this a secret, huh? It's something you *really* don't want me to hear, isn't it?"

"N-No..."

"Hm?" Iroha's eyebrow twitched when she picked up on the nervousness in my voice. And just like that, her grumpy pout was replaced with a smug grin. "Oooh, I see! So that's what it is!"

"Wh-What are you talking about?"

"You're listening to something you can't tell other people about. A

voice, right?"

A jolt pierced through my chest. Iroha stared at me knowingly and put her finger to her jaw like she was a great detective unraveling a mystery with her powers of deduction.

"I know just what you're listening to, Senpai!"

"W-Wait, you've got it all wrong! I-I..."

"It's a super-lewd ASMR, right?!"

"Huh?! Oh. No, it's not."

I could almost hear the jazzy background music playing as she made her decisive deduction, but the moment it came out of her mouth, it was clear she was way off the mark.

Wait, a high schooler like her shouldn't be throwing the word "lewd" around. And where did she learn what ASMR was? As far as I knew, ASMR was just something for men with a sound fetish... Maybe I was wrong.

Even though she was totally wrong, Iroha was still grinning like the cat that got the cream.

"Aww, you're being all shy again! Look, don't worry! Even if you're the kinda pervert who gets off on listening to lewd voice recordings while sitting next to a super cute girl like me in a super hot teacher's car, I'll still be here for you as your little sister! Ain't I a great sister?"

"You're not my sister, and everything you just said was bullshit."

"Hey, Sumire-chan-sensei! Ozuma! Listen to this! Senpai's—"

Iroha made to lean forward.

I slapped my hand over Iroha's mouth and forced her back into her seat.

"Shut up and sit down."

"Mmmphhh!"

Translation: "Get off me you perv!"

"Chill, will you? I mean it. Hey, don't put your arm there!"

"Mmmph!"

Translation: "Huh? Getting embarrassed again? Why's that, Senpai?"

"It's kinda amazing how I have no idea what you're saying, but just the look in your eyes is pissing me off."

Although Iroha never found out what I was listening to, she ended up bullying me regardless. No matter how much I tried to change my fate in this world line, I guess I was stuck under the influence of the attractor field.

"Listen to those two flirting in the back. It's disgusting."

"Next time we turn around they might actually be making out or something. Wanna see?"

"L-Listen, if I saw that, I'd probably be so scared that I'd slam my

foot down on the brakes and we'd be looking at some serious Tokyo drift."

"As long as we don't observe them, there's no telling what they're doing. Are they making out or not? It's Schrödinger's make-out session."

"How dare you make a mockery of one of the greatest physicists to have ever lived!"

"Oh, we're coming up to a rest stop soon. Let's pull over before those two go overboard."

Guys, I can totally hear you.

The only reason I didn't bother to deny anything was because I knew it would just encourage Iroha to keep being Iroha and make them say I was "protesting too much" or something. Iroha had gotten bored of bullying me a little while ago and was now back to bopping along with her headphones.

Our car with its noisy passengers eventually made its way into the parking area, and at last we had some time to relax for a bit. Iroha said she was going to the restroom and then disappeared before our eyes, like a Cheshire cat. Sumire reclined the driver's seat and put a thin book over her head so she could take a nap. Ozu and I went to the kiosk in the parking area to stock up on drinks and snacks.

I'm guessing we'll be here for an hour or so at least...

We came back to the car to find the driver's seat empty. When I looked around for Sumire, I found her hiding behind the vehicle, crouched down with her phone glued to her ear.

"...a little too hasty? I'm...beach..."

She was keeping her voice low, so it was hard to figure out what she was talking about. Not that I made a habit of eavesdropping on people. I pretended I hadn't heard anything at all.

"What's up with Murasaki Shikibu-sensei?"

"I dunno, but she's on the phone. It kinda looks serious too. Maybe work called her for something," I told Ozu, who was coming up behind me, before pushing him back around to the front of the car.

I opened up one of the freshly purchased drinks and gulped some of it down. The cool liquid soothed my parched throat. I felt soothed from the top of my head to the tips of my toes, totally de-stressed after my weird quarrel with Iroha.

"Anyway," Ozu rescrewed the lid on his bottle and glanced over at the other side of the car, "I feel kinda bad for her. It's summer vacation, but she's still gettin' a ton of calls. Must be tough being an adult."

"I wish we could just stay in high school forever."

"Yeah, there's no way I could work a normal job like she does."

There's so much that just seems stupidly complicated."

"I get you."

Ozu wasn't your average high schooler. To put it briefly, he was a genius programmer. Just calling him that wouldn't explain the extent of it though. He didn't see the world the way other people did. It was like he didn't belong here. Freshwater fish can't live in the ocean, and if a saltwater fish dares swim its way into a river, it will die. In the same way, Ozu didn't belong in a traditional role in a traditional society.

Wait, that's way too serious a topic. Knock it off, me.

It was summer vacation, and I was out here with a group of friendly faces going to the beach. I could cut out the serious talk for one day, right?

"O-Oh, hi guys! H-H-How long have you been there?!" Sumire said.

"Not long. You seem shaken."

"I-I-I'm totally not! Y-You guys didn't hear anything, right?"

We stared.

"G-Good. That's good!" Sumire made her way back to the car, her movements stiffer than a mannequin as I watched her through narrowed eyes.

"Something's up. She's acting weird. Just like when she's about to miss a deadline."

"Don't you think you're being kinda harsh?" Ozu asked through a yawn.

"You sleepy?"

"Yeah...been pulling a lot of all-nighters lately."

Now that he mentioned it, he had said he'd been up last night fine-tuning the sat nav so that it could pick up traffic and recalculate the best routes with better accuracy than before.

"Why don't you get some sleep? I doubt Sumire-sensei'll need you to help navigate again till we're off the highway."

"I think I will. It's a shame I'll miss out on you and Iroha flirting, though."

"You'd miss out on that even if you were awake. C'mon, get in the car and get some rest."

"Okay..." Ozu yawned.

His head kept drooping like he was dead on his feet. I put my arm around his shoulder and led him to the passenger seat. The moment he sat down, he was out like a light.

"Imagine being able to fall asleep so quickly..."

I made sure he was positioned safely before fastening his seat belt. It was then that I noticed Sumire's white-knuckled hands on the wheel and the sweat sliding down her face.

“You okay? You’re sweating pretty badly.”

“Wh-Wha—Huh?”

“Did something happen? You’ve been acting weird. Here.” I held out a handkerchief to her.

“Eep!” She jumped back from it like it was some kind of medieval torture device. Staring at it, she opened her mouth and asked in a shaky voice, “Y-You want my little finger, don’t you?”

“No, I want you to wipe away your sweat. Do I look like a yakuza boss to you?”

She had been driving for hours in the midsummer heat. It’d be bad if she got heat stroke, so I just thought it’d be a good idea for her to wipe the sweat off and have something to drink, but she was acting like I was plotting to kill her or something.

But I did regret my sarcasm a little. “Sorry. I didn’t mean to be rude.”

“N-No, I mean...it’s not like we’re at school, right?”

“Maybe not, but you’re still the responsible adult here. I wanna try and treat you with some respect, even if you’re not bothered either way.”

“Nngh! You’re making me feel even worse by being so nice!”

“What’s wrong? Why are you curling up in despair?”

“I-It’s nothing! Oh, look, Ozuma-kun’s asleep! You know, if you and Iroha-chan want to sleep together too, I don’t mind. Just make sure you wear protection!”

“Get your mind out of the gutter. Also, what sort of messed-up teacher *encourages* that kind of behavior?!” I bonked her on the head with one of the unopened plastic bottles before passing it to her.

“Hey, that hur—actually, that’s kinda refreshing.”

“Drink this, cool down, get your fluid levels up, and then give us a safe ride to the beach, okay?”

“Thanks, Aki. You’re too nice!”

“You’re winding me up, but I *am* grateful. If you weren’t driving us, we’d probably have to crowd on a bus or train or something to get to the beach.”

“Y-Yeah. The b-beach!”

“Plus...you’re my fiancée, kind of. I’ve gotta take care of you.” Halfway through my words, I found I couldn’t look her in the eye anymore when I realized how depressing the situation was.

Sumire smiled. “You know, Aki, sometimes you’re as cute as any shota. Aaah, my heart!” Sumire clutched at her chest, her irises transforming into hearts.

“Shut it. If you wanna compliment me, make it less creepy.” I pulled back from her in disgust.

I went to get into the back seat again when suddenly I felt

goosebumps spring up along the back of my neck. I could feel something indescribably terrifying right behind me, and slowly turned around to see...

“Don’t get too flirty with her, y’hear?”

An inhumanly chilling voice whispered right into my ear, with all the deep-seated resentment of the most evil of spirits.

“Gah!” I let out a scream and jumped.

When I finally managed to turn around I saw a long, black-haired girl in a white kimono, her hair still damp with the water she had drowned in. Oh, except it wasn’t a ghost. It was my annoying, grinning kouhai.

“Oh my God! I totally got you!” She laughed.

“I can’t believe you’re pulling this shit again! I told you not to use that stupid voice!”

“Oooh? What’s the matter, Senpai? Aren’t you supposed to be suuuper efficient and suuuper logical? How come you’re scared of ghosts, then? Oh, I know! It’s because you’re a cutie with a cute weak spot!”

“Sorry to disappoint, but I don’t believe in ghosts! It’s just that your creepy voice is too scary, dumbass!”

It was the same logic that applied to a VTuber’s voice sounding cute, even if you knew it was just some old man using voice-changing software. Even when you knew there was nothing to be scared of, she put on such a convincing voice that it terrified you anyway.

“I’m not disappointed, but you are cute!”

“I told you to stop it!”

“I would, but it’s just too funny! Lemme mess around with it till I get bored at least!” Iroha doubled over with laughter.

“Bitch...” I couldn’t deal with this anymore. I wanted to try and play nice for the whole car journey, but I wasn’t a saint. It was time to bring out the big guns. “It’s exorcism time.”

“Guhuh?!”

I flitted forward and stuck a long piece of paper right on Iroha’s forehead.

“Wh-What’s this? I can’t see anything!”

“It’s a super-powerful talisman I bought from a shrine!”

The one in our neighborhood, as a matter of fact.

“Why the heck d’you have this with you?!” Iroha cried, flapping her arms around like an afflicted spirit.

“The news is always buzzing about tons of accidents and stuff at the beach during summer, right? People getting swept away by the waves, or being poisoned by shellfish, or getting eaten by sharks...”

“I was with you till the last one!”

“Well, maybe not in Japan, but people do get eaten by sharks in

other countries! Anyway, even though it's a miniscule risk, there are people getting into unfortunate incidents at the beach. They get injured, and some even die. You know that death effectively lowers your productivity rate to zero, right? Death's gotta be the least efficient way to live."

"You don't hafta justify it for me to know death means bad! No need to hit me with the statistics report, Professor Efficionado!"

"I'm always careful to keep the risk of accidents as close to zero as possible, but I know that it's all down to luck in the end. That's why I do everything I can to keep myself as lucky as possible." I demonstrated by spreading out all the stuff I bought from the shrine in front of her.

Talismans, charms, lucky arrows... A full range of items which had all kinds of effects, from keeping me safe from evil spirits to blessing me with the safe delivery of my child.

"Correct me if I'm wrong Senpai, but...are you a total moron?"

"Excuse you! I'm trying to make sure we all have a safe trip here! I'll have you know I bought it all with the Alliance's budget."

"I don't think this counts as a business expense, y'know."

"Don't worry. I asked Makigai-sensei to put these in the story, so now they count as reference items!"

"Huh. You sure came up with a long-winded excuse to try and cover up how you're a scaredy-cat."

"Exorcism!"

"Eeek! Two talismans?! Now I *really* can't see a damn thing!"

She wanted to paint me with that brush, huh? So what if my sensitivity to danger was a little higher than other people's? That didn't make me a scaredy-cat!

Right?

We left the rest stop after that and continued along the highway for a while. Ozu was out like a light, and even Iroha settled down after the long drive and all the energy she expended getting on my nerves. In fact, when I glanced at her, I noticed she was asleep too. The peaceful atmosphere in the car and the gentle rocking of the comfortable seat below me soon earned me a long awaited visit from the sandman.

What would I see when I woke up?

An endless ocean of blue?

What swimsuit did Iroha settle on in the end?

Was Mashiro working hard, despite missing out on our beach trip?

Those aimless thoughts drifted through my mind and faded into the blackness that slowly invited me deeper into dreamland.

And then...

When I opened my eyes next, I saw a vast deep-blue ocean spread out before us.

No, I'm totally kidding. We were in some shabby-looking village surrounded by a zillion trees. The wind rustled their leaves, and I could hear stray dogs howling in the distance. Though the same scorching sun from the city was beating down in the sky, the air here felt much cooler. There were buildings scattered here and there, but they were so aged, they looked like they could collapse at any second. This place was so old, I'd believe you if you said we somehow traveled back to the Edo period.

Look, can I just get to the point?

It wasn't the beach! We were in the freaking mountains! Why were we in some decrepit geriatric town of all places?! Something was up. Waaaaay up.

The car's tires were plastered with dirt and dead leaves, and the body was streaked with mud, which only went to show how much of a trek it had been for the poor thing to come up here. I looked behind it, but couldn't see anything that could rightly be described as "road"...so how the heck had we gotten here in the first place?

"Sumire-sensei. No, wait. Murasaki Shikibu."

"Yes?"

"Care to explain what's going on? Why are we in the middle of nowhere? And where's the beach?"

"I..."

"You?"

"I had no choooooooice!" Without worrying that it might dirty her tights, Sumire sank down onto the mulchy ground and squished her forehead into it. It was a pose I saw her—Murasaki Shikibu-sensei—in *a lot*. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm so sorry! I swear we'll only be here for one day tops! We'll zoom off for the beach the second we're done here!"

"Quit apologizing and just tell me what's going on. Where are we?"

"Kageishi Village!"

"Kageishi Village?!"

"This is where the Kageishi family originated, and the head family still lives here. Almost everyone in this place is related to us in some way."

"I guess there are still families who are the biggest presence in their village. But don't you think naming the village after your family goes a little far? It's kinda...twisted."

"It's not a very big village, and the population's only getting

smaller.”

That was obvious. It didn’t take more than a single sweeping gaze to take in the entire village from where we were. It was wide enough and there were plenty of buildings, but I could only see one or two people walking around outside.

“Okay, next question. Why’d you bring us here?”

“Well, I sent those photos of our lovey-dovey date to my family over LIME.”

“Did that...cause trouble?”

I thought back to when Midori stormed into our classroom. The undeniably suggestive photos she had shown me. Had Sumire’s whole family reacted a little...badly?

“No, not at all.”

“Y’know, sometimes I can’t tell if your family is ultra-conservative or ultra-liberal...”

“But then they said, if I got myself such a wonderful man then why haven’t they met him yet? Aren’t you supposed to introduce someone to your family once things start getting serious? They said if I didn’t come and introduce you by the end of the day, they wouldn’t accept that our relationship was serious!”

“Ah.”

I see. In other words, they were testing her to see if we were the real deal. So they really were old-fashioned.

“Couldn’t you just have told them it was too short notice?”

“No! Do you know how terrifying my grandfather is? If I said no, he would’ve cursed me all the way from here and I’d be dead by tomorrow!”

“So he’s some kind of evil sorcerer now? Also, stop trying to make me believe in that stuff.”

The only world I knew was civilized Japanese society. I wished she’d stop talking as though magic and stuff like that was real. Anyway.

“Your family are all teachers, and have been for generations, right? That’s why you had no choice but to become one yourself.”

“Yes, that’s right.”

“And yet this ancient family of teachers lives in this dead village in the middle of nowhere, without a child in sight?”

“Oh, it’s complicated, but I can explain. Okay, so the Kageishi teachers go way back to the Edo period, where—”

“Save it for later. This sounds way too long to bother with now.”

“Eep!”

A hand appeared on Sumire’s shoulder. The creepy guy standing like a ghost behind her was my friend, Kohinata Ozuma. AKA Ozu.

At least, I think it was. Probably. I was just thrown off a bit because he usually didn't look so murderous.

"Murasaki Shikibu-sensei."

"Y-Yeah?"

"You trampled on the system and the schedule I spent the whole night coming up with," he said, a frightening chill in his voice and an icy glare in his eyes which blocked out all hints of emotion. Even a spider about to come down on its prey probably looked kinder than he did now.

"I-I know, and I feel bad about it! But my grandfather's so scary that—"

"Murasaki Shikibu-sensei. It appears you have chosen death." Ignoring her excuse, Ozu raised his hand high in the air.

"Eeeeeek!"

"H-Hey, Ozu. I don't want any bloodshed. This is supposed to be —" I stepped in front of the cowering Sumire in an attempt to stop Ozu's hand.

As it turned out, he kept his hand in the air. "I'm gonna hack into your PC, find all your older women x shota porn and send every last file to the Board of Education."

"NOOOOOO! I'LL DIE! SOCIALLY, AT LEAST!"

I'd had no idea Ozu could be so cruel. In fact, it was such an extreme death sentence that I felt a shiver running up my spine. He must've been *really* mad. I got it, though. He'd poured hours into planning the perfect trip for us, and now it had all been ruined. I already had a mental note not to get him mad, but this time I underlined it.

"Save me, Akiteru-sama! Ozuma-kun's gonna violate me! He's gonna strip me naked for all to see!" Sumire clinged to me, her eyes wet with tears.

"Murasaki Shikibu-sensei..." I looked down at her with pity in my eyes. "Thanks for everything you've done for me."

"You're throwing me to the wolves?!"

"I'm surprised you never attempted to molest us first..."

"Now you're making me out to be a criminal?! You know I'd never do anything that'd get me arrested!"

"Do you swear that's the truth so help you God?"

"Yes! I'll swear on anything!"

"Swear on Arashima-kun?"

"Forgive me Lord for I have siiiiiinned!" Sumire broke down in tears.

Maybe I'd gone a bit too far. I was starting to feel bad, so I decided it was about time I helped her out. Just as I was about to open my mouth, Iroha appeared.

“Uh, Senpai? Guys? Could I just—”

“IROHA-CHAN!”

“Ew! B-Blow your nose! Please!”

After being belittled by both me and Ozu, our twenty-five-year-old teacher clung to her last hope: Iroha.

Iroha patted the pathetic lump of teacher awkwardly on the head. “Uh, I don’t really get what’s going on, but isn’t this place kind of like the setting in that game you guys are making?”

“So? That doesn’t mean Murasaki Shikibu-sensei deserves any less punishment for ruining my perfect schedule.”

“Wait, calm down a second. The mountains aren’t a bad place to come for a trip, right? Plus, it’ll be a good place to get some ideas for *Koyagi*. What’s it they say? ‘Killing two birds with one stone.’” Iroha winked at me, being careful not to let Ozu or Sumire see. “Senpai uses that line all the time. Y’know, ’cause he loves efficiency and everything.”

She was throwing me a lifeline: an opportunity to pacify Ozu. The perfect little princess part fit her like a glove. Iroha used her keen powers of observation to suss out people’s weaknesses and use those to get the best possible outcome.

“Iroha’s right. Sure, the schedule got messed up, but this looks like a pretty good spot to get some inspiration for the Alliance. Might as well get some use and enjoyment out of this place.”

“That does make sense... If Aki doesn’t see it as a waste, then I guess I’ll back down.”

“Right. I think we should let her off the hook this time.”

“Okay, agreed. I still think you’re too nice though.” At last, a flicker of human emotion began to return to Ozu’s eyes.

Iroha had managed to manipulate Ozu’s weak spot beautifully. Ozu knew I was determined to use my efficient mindset to lead the 05th Floor Alliance in the best way I could, and he respected that. If I gave my oh-so-efficient opinion on the matter, there was no way he could object.

Anyway, no matter how mad he got at her, I doubted he was actually going to ruin Sumire’s whole career.

“But, Murasaki Shikibu-sensei...”

“Eep?!”

“You know what will happen if you do this again.”

Okay, never mind. He *was* serious.

“I’m glad you’re not mad anymore.”

“Yup. She’s not getting a second chance though.”

“Huh?”

“I already have the files from her hard drive. And I’m not saving them for nothing.”

“I-I’ll try and keep her in line.”

Chapter 6: My Teacher's Grandfather Is... Uh...

There was a large, old inn clinging to the bare rock of the mountain side. It stood out among the bungalows that made up the rest of the village. With the sun setting on the other side of the mountains, dark shadows seeped from the inn walls, giving it a creepy vibe. It looked like something out of a horror film. The walls looked like you could tear them down with your bare hands. A horrible draft seeped through the cracks in those walls, and weed ran amok all over the property. This was the only form of accommodation in the village, so we'd brought Iroha and Ozu here to check in. Sumire's family were expecting to meet her fiancé—dragging those two along with us would just have been weird. We wanted to make sure they had somewhere to rest before doing anything else.

The Koei Inn. Iroha looked up at the sign of the three-story building and let out an impressed whistle.

"This place is messed up!"

"Don't let the owner hear you." I couldn't help but scold her, even though I agreed with her assessment.

"This place gets zero sunlight, and looks more like a holding pen for animals than an inn," Ozu said. "All you need is a great detective staying here and it's bound to result in a locked-room murder mystery."

"Sure, if this was a manga or something."

And since Ozu was constantly having encounters that I only expected to see in a fictional setting, I hoped he would shut up in case his words came true. We should be fine though, right? His specialty was romantic comedy clichés, not mysteries. Right?

"This is the newest building in the village. It's only nine years old! A total loli!"

"That just makes it a million times worse! What could've happened in those nine years that it ended up like this?!"

Either its owner hadn't looked after this place at all, or some supernatural force had acted on it to make it fit in with its surroundings. That might've been the real mystery here.

Anyway, enough of my complaining. Ozu and Iroha just had to complete check-in and they'd be all set.

"Ohoho! What's a bunch of youngsters like you doing out here?"

We stepped through the entrance under the tiled gate, where an elderly innkeeper in traditional dress greeted us at the reception. She was horrendously short, what with the extreme angle of her back. In fact, she only came up to my stomach. Her wrinkled face was deathly pale, as though she had crawled out of her grave just the day before to come and run this place.

I shivered. The more I looked at her, the more gruesome the images in my mind became.

“How many rooms would you like? The rooms can fit four, but if you’d rather split up boy-girl, you can have two.”

“That sounds good, tha—”

“Wait, Aki,” Sumire interrupted me. “My family might have prepared a room for me in case I wanted to stay the night. Why not get just the one room? It’ll be cheaper.”

“You think so? And you’re okay with us having a mixed room?”

“I don’t mind!” Iroha said innocently, poking her head forward between us. “Sure, they’re boys, but it’s just this loser and my brother. They wouldn’t do anything to me. I actually think it’d be more dangerous for them if they *didn’t* have me!”

“Ooh, wait, that’s a great point! There are bound to be sparks if we put these two in a room together! All right! We’ll go boy-girl! I’ll cover the cost!”

“Stay away from me, Pervert-sensei.” I put my hand on Sumire’s panting face to keep her back. Then I gave Iroha a sharp glare.

“Splitting up girls and boys is just common sense. Besides, I wouldn’t get any sleep if I had to share a room with you.”

“Why’s that then? It’s ’cause you wouldn’t stop thinking about how I’m *right there*, isn’t it? Well, I guess that’s normal for guys in puberty. Sharing a room with a cute girl like me is bound to wake up the little man downstairs!” Iroha grinned.

“Wrong. It’s because you’re gonna stay up all night bothering me.”

“I would *never*! You always assume the worst! Besides, how can I go all out when Ozuma’s there? Just a little something called manners.”

“As if I’m gonna believe that. Ozu’s presence has never stopped you before.”

“You won’t give up, huh? If you’re that sure, why don’t we make a bet?”

“What kind of bet?”

“If I pull some kinda prank that interrupts your sleep, I lose. I’ll take the L, and then you can have a prize for winning!”

“What kind of prize?”

Iroha grinned before grabbing the two voluptuous mounds of flesh on her chest through her clothes. She then tilted her head at the most

alluring angle possible (around forty-five degrees).

“You can cop a feel.”

A goddess of fertility. A personification of Mother Nature celebrating the melon harvest in Turkey. A gravure model with a large, perfectly-molded chest. Image after erotic image flashed through my mind, each getting more and more erotic. Paintings, photos, erotic drawings, and erotic, erotic, erotic, DAMN YOU, IROHA, stop messing with my head! Why d’you have to grab yourself like that?!

I forced myself to look away from her to put a stop to the incessant (and indecent) mental images. My discomfort didn’t escape Iroha’s notice.

“I *knew* that was on your mind!” she laughed. “You’re too cute, Senpai!”

“Y-You know shit! Why would I be interested in two globs of fat?”

“Ooh, I wonder? Dunno if I believe you, Senpai!”

“Doesn’t matter! I don’t care, and that’s the truth!”

Of course, that wasn’t the truth. Not in the least. I mean, I was a guy just like any other. Of course I was interested in that sort of thing. If a girl said I could touch her boobs as much as I wanted, no strings attached, I’d have a very hard time refusing—unless that girl was Iroha.

When Iroha said “no strings attached,” you could bet there were strings attached. She might have been outright lying. The moment I reached out for them, she’d be like, “Just kidding! You’re such a gross virgin!” and then I’d never hear the end of it for *at least* another two weeks.

“Why don’t you give it up already, Aki? The real problem here is that we can’t afford two rooms,” Ozu said, his eyes flitting between me and Iroha as we glared at each other. “Our carefully budgeted travel plans were already out the window the moment we had to stay here. We’ll have to change our hotel booking too. I don’t think it’s a great idea to cut into our budget even more.”

“Ugh. I can’t argue with that.”

We’d had a hotel booked by the beach, but now we’d have to change our arrival date. I could see a cancellation fee in our future, as well as the expense of having to book new rooms. The Alliance’s budget was really going to take a hit.

“So, how many rooms would you like?” the old woman asked impatiently.

We had no choice.

“Just one...please,” I croaked, like a villain who had finally accepted his loss in a battle of psychological wits. I looked at Iroha, despair overwhelming me as phantom bloody tears rolled down my

cheeks.

She smiled sweetly and gave me a few reassuring pats on the shoulder. "Let's make it a good one okay, Senpai?"

Dammit. Did she have to grin at me like that?

We finished up our disaster of a check-in.

"Uh, could I leave bringing in the luggage to you, Iroha-chan and Ozuma-kun?" Sumire suddenly asked nervously. "Aki and I need to get going."

"Ah, right."

Check-in was the least of our problems. Sumire and I had to face the music. The next few hours could determine the rest of Murasaki Shikibu-sensei's creative career, and her life. We couldn't screw this up.

"Let's go see the head of the Kageishi family. Let's go see my grandfather!"

"Are you sure it's okay for us to stay in that inn?" I asked Sumire as we made our way down the winding path between the rice paddies. "Most of the people who live here are related to you in some way, right? The innkeeper won't start talking about us to everyone, will she?"

"Don't worry. That inn is the one place in this village where my family's influence doesn't reach."

"That's a pretty impressive claim in a place like this."

"It's precisely because that inn's in a place like this. It was bought as part of a village-renewal project. The employees there all come from some government agency, so none of them have roots here."

"Is one shabby little inn really enough to drive up tourism?"

"Apparently they get a lot of folks who like decrepit places like that, or manga artists cutting it close to their deadlines who want to rid themselves of distraction. There's nothing to do here, after all."

"I'll keep that in mind."

"H-Huh? What are you looking at me like that for? You're not planning to abandon me in a dump like this the next time I might miss a deadline, are you?"

"Isn't this 'dump' your hometown?" I raised an eyebrow.

"Anyway, I'm glad it's safe, but I don't think we've passed by anyone since we got here."

"Of course not. Everyone's too busy plowing the fields behind their houses, or hunting in the mountains, or playing online games at home."

"Either this place is a dump or they have good internet. Pick one."

Did they even have the internet in these kinds of villages? I

couldn't even tell you which prefecture we were in anymore. I could write a whole list of questions I had about this place. I was frowning, when suddenly we heard the voices of children. When I looked over, I saw three young girls under the eaves of a decrepit bungalow. They were crouched down and drawing something with a stick in the mud as they sang a mysterious song.

*“Little bird, little bird, the little bird merchant is here.
Little bird, little bird, he has a crying child for sale.
And our parents in the east, the sun is in the west,
It's time for our afternoon snack.
And our parents in the east, the sun is in the west,
It's time for our afternoon snack.”*

“I've never heard that song before. Is it a traditional nursery rhyme in this place?”

“I don't know. I don't remember singing anything like that, but my family lived out in the city. We only came back here for Obon or New Year's. There are probably loads of those kinds of small things that I don't know about this place.”

“Makes sense. It's kinda a creepy song though.”

“Creepy?”

“Adults often teach children nursery rhymes with a moral. That's why you sometimes get pretty dark ones.”

“It's about a little bird, though. That's cute, right?”

“Sure, if it's really talking about a bird.”

“What do you mean?”

“Listen to the lyrics. A ‘little bird’ merchant. You know where birds are kept? Cages. And what is this merchant selling? A child. Sounds to me an awful lot like this guy captures kids and sells them as slaves.”

“What is this, a literature lesson? You're reading way too much into it.”

“What about the thing about the parents in the east and the sun in the west? There's that famous haiku right, that has the line ‘and the moon is in the east, the sun in the west.’ Why was the moon, a celestial object, replaced with ‘parents’?”

“I dunno.”

“What if the kidnapped kids' parents were killed in the process?”

“What?!”

I continued in a low, grim voice. “The sun is in the west. Their parents are in the east, furthest away from the light. In other words, in darkness, meaning they've lost their lives and—”

“S-Stop it! Stop analyzing it! You're making it sound way too

scary!" Sumire wailed, her eyes watering.

I was scaring myself too. Wait, no I wasn't. It was just kind of creepy, that's all.

I'll still cut it out, though.

The girls weren't singing anymore. I could feel their eyes boring into the back of my head, but I figured it was just my imagination. Best to just ignore it.

"A-Anyway, let's talk about something more important. Let's go see the head of your family, Sensei."

"Y-Yes. Let's."

Sumire and I hurried away between the rice paddies as though escaping those creepy children's stares. I just wanted to get this over with and leave this place as soon as possible, and I couldn't place a finger on why exactly I felt that way.

We arrived at the Kageishi house not long after that. It was a grand yet traditional house. Parts of it gave off an old-fashioned air, and there were signs that several places had undergone repair, giving it the impression of a classic stately home. It had likely been restored using modern methods to keep it looking like it would have at the time it was built, just like temples, shrines, and world heritage sites.

Among the rest of the village and its neglected buildings, this place looked like a palace. Some women, who appeared to be servants, greeted us at the entrance and let us through to the living room. We walked along the long, raised veranda outside, passing ponds which looked like they housed koi and gardens layered with small, white pebbles. Sumire opened a sliding screen, revealing a large room layered with tatami flooring. I doubted that even the poshest traditional restaurants in Tokyo were as big and refined as this place.

The peculiar, grassy scent of the tatami mats wafted up from the floor. A line of black-and-white photographs of stern-looking men glared down at us from high up on the wall. They must have been former heads of the Kageishi family.

Everything I'd seen in this place was just so intimidating. I knelt down on the floor cushion provided for me, and it was only now that a semblance of thought was returning to my mind and I was able to speak.

"This place is really something. Is it a heritage site?"

"Apparently it very nearly was. Pretty impressive, right?" Sumire smirked.

Seeing her acting smug pissed me off at the best of times, but at least this time it was justified. This place was incredible.

"What went so wrong in your life that you came from here and ended up as Shikibu?"

“Wait. Is that an insult?”

“Those former family heads look way more serious than I thought. I feel like they’d run a super strict house—more likely to raise a Midori-san than a Sumire-sensei.”

“Whatever you’re implying, they raised me right! I’m a hard-working and serious sister to her!”

“You know how to play the part at least. The problem is your interest in young 2D boys.”

In my eyes, that was enough to make her the complete opposite of Midori.

“You always make it sound so bad! Did you know people used to get married around twelve years old? Who cares about age if a couple loves each other?”

“Lots of people care. Besides, you say twelve, but your beloved Arashima-kun is only five, right?”

“That doesn’t matter! Anything’s legal when it comes to fiction!” Sumire whined, sticking her tongue out at me.

Did I mention this woman was a teacher?

“Anyway, the way I see it, it doesn’t matter what secrets you keep. People only know what you show them.”

“Right.”

I was spending a lot of time hiding the truth lately. I lied to my classmates about my relationship with Mashiro, I lied to the Alliance about Iroha’s voice acting, and I lied to my uncle about how well I got on with other girls.

As long as you kept the real truth hidden, the other person would only see the “truth” you showed them. I felt that was fair enough, what with it being the most efficient way to keep people happy, but I wasn’t naive enough to think I could keep it up forever, nor that it was a good idea to do so.

“It must be exhausting having to keep up a facade around your family all the time. I don’t think I could do it.”

“It was really tough. I know now how the persecuted Christians felt during the Edo period. I spent my student days secretly licking pictures of Arashima-kun...oh, the suffering I went through!”

“I get what you’re saying. You could’ve phrased it less awfully though.”

Sumire had needed to hide her interests and learn how to read her parents. She’d been prevented from being herself, and it had been a total waste. Life is short enough as it is. What’s the point if you’re not allowed to do the stuff that makes you happy and are forced to do stuff that just stresses you out? Because self-restraint turns you into a respectable adult? Because you’re supposed to follow the path of self-sacrifice set by everyone before you?

I've never heard anything dumber. Either you pursue what you love and develop the talents to become successful at it, or you do what your parents say is the "right thing" and end up...where, exactly? I think it's obvious which of the two is the better choice.

"Shh! They're coming, Ooboshi-kun!"

"Ah!"

Sumire and I straightened our postures as we heard people approaching from the other side of the sliding screens. I was here because I was Sumire's fake fiancé. I had to prove myself dependable enough that her family would give up on trying to arrange a marriage for her. I had no idea who I was about to meet, but I had a fair bit of experience with weird adults like Tsukinomori-san and Amachi-san. I doubted that was enough preparation for this, but it was something at least. Assuming this person was normal, I shouldn't have any problems.

The screen slid open. I could hear heavy footsteps. Then I saw him.

"SORRY TO KEEP YOU WAITING."

I was lost for words as I lay eyes on the man who gave his greeting in such a threatening tone. This guy was huge. Was he really related to Sumire, or was he some bear who had wandered down here from the mountains? The bristly stubble on his chin looked like it could kill a man. He had a scar over one eye that looked like a claw mark, and his breath came out in white mist.

Remember what I said about hoping this guy was normal? Yeah, so much for that.

"A pleasure to meet you. I am Kageishi Kou, current head of the Kageishi household." He sat down across from us. At that size, he was either a bandit leader, or he shared his body with the spirit of an evil god.

"I-It's nice to meet you. My name is Ooboshi Akiteru. I'm dating Sumire-sen—uh, Sumire-san."

"Hm." Kou studied me carefully through narrowed eyes. I met his gaze as evenly as I could, trying not to let up the fact that my folded legs were trembling. "Has Sumire told you about her family?"

"She hasn't gone into too much detail yet, but I've learned a little more by coming to the village."

"We Kageishis have a strong sense of tradition. We have been in the teaching profession for generations."

"I understand, sir. May I ask something about that?"

"Speak."

"You are proud of this tradition, and yet to become a teacher there must be children and schools. Why does the head family reside in a mountain village far from the rest of civilization, in a place with

no schools and few people?”

Next to me, Sumire’s eyes widened. It might have sounded like I was insulting the countryside to her, but I wanted to ask the question as plainly as I could. I wanted to know the precise details of this tradition of theirs. Once I did, I would be in a better position to negotiate Sumire’s freedom.

“This used to be a large ninja settlement.”

“Sorry, ninjas? The ones dressed all in black hired by powerful feudal lords?”

“Yes, although they differ slightly from what most people picture when they think of ninjas. They may better be described as spies. They would infiltrate hostile territories for the purposes of assassination and gathering intelligence.”

“So they were the ninjas of the Sengoku era, then? I was thinking of later ninjas.”

“Indeed. With the Edo period came the end of our conflict-focused society, and the Kageishi family retired from the ninja profession. It was the shogun, the military leader at the time, who saved the unemployed family and prevented them all from being driven to suicide. Then, y’know, the shogun hired them to teach at the school.”

“I see, so that’s how the Kageishi family came to be teachers—wait, ‘y’know’?”

“The shogun granted our family that duty, and so we continue to show him loyalty and gratitude by following that path to this day.” Kou finished his explanation without even batting an eyelid at my interjection.

That was fine by me. I’d been after an explanation here, and I got it. The Kageishis used to be ninjas with a strong sense of loyalty, and they were still producing teachers in this day and age to honor the memory of the shogun who gave them that job. I had nothing against that, and I wasn’t about to refute the value of history and tradition.

I couldn’t overlook the fact that something which had happened so long ago was stopping Sumire from being free, though. Wait, let me rephrase.

This wasn’t something that should stand in the way of Sumire’s talented illustrations being used to the 05th Floor Alliance’s advantage. That’s better. This wasn’t about Sumire; this was about the Alliance and the benefit to myself.

“If I marry into the Kageishi family, does that mean I gotta—I have to become a teacher too?”

“Naturally.”

“I see. By the way, you said ‘y’know’ before, didn’t you?”

“You must become learned in the matters of the Kageishi family. More so, seeing as you are the groom. Ooboshi-kun. I want you to

show me that you will be a suitable husband to Sumire.”

I gulped and glanced at Sumire. Her shoulders were hunched up anxiously. She was usually so brazen, and I'd never seen her shrink away from anybody before. There was no denying that this guy was a huge deal—and that was exactly what filled me with determination. I was going to stand up to Kageishi Kou with all the resolution I could muster. Enough for both me and Sumire.

“I was hoping you would say that. I'm not prepared to back down.”

“Very well. I shall now ask you a series of questions. Be forewarned that I shall see past any falsehoods, young man. Prepare yourself!” Kageishi's eyes flared open.

The burning fire in his eyes was enough to make me want to run for the hills, but I held my ground.

Come at me. Ask whatever you want. I'll take whatever you've got!

Thirty minutes later...

“Ha ha ha! Lol! You're more of a chad than I thought!”

Kou had taken a real shine to me. The intimidating air around him was gone now, and he was slamming his hand down on my shoulder as he laughed and laughed. He was also using more...“expressive” language.

“Sumire sure knows how to pick 'em! Why didn't ya tell me you were going out with such a legend?” Kou laughed.

“H-He's my student! I was worried our love wouldn't be accepted,” Sumire mumbled, averting her gaze.

“Are you serious?!” Kou guffawed. “Love has no limits! It's not like the ol' shogun ever outlawed loving your students either! Well, he might've done, but if it's not on record, he probably didn't!”

This guy totally worshipped the shogun's every word, but when it came to stuff he hadn't said, Kou couldn't care less! I had thought this place was going to be super uptight and strict, but maybe they'd be willing to hear me out after all. Even Sumire looked more relaxed than before.

“So you accept our relationship? Does that mean you'll stop—”

“I'll call it off... Psych! You know what the deal is. You gotta be married and ready to pop some out before twenty-five. That's, like, an unbreakable rule!”

“But...”

“Hey, it used to be fifteen. We're just movin' with the times, y'know.”

Sounded pretty flexible for an unbreakable rule. Nowadays it was fine to be single in your thirties or forties, but I guess it was a bit

much to ask them to “move with the times” *that* quickly.

“I’m not a monster, though. I don’t wanna break any rules, but you are my granddaughter, and I wanna support you. So...” Kou took a deep breath. The next moment, his eyes flared open wide. “We shall have the Ceremony of Knots tomorrow evening!”

“Wh...” Sumire gasped.

“The ‘Ceremony of Knots?’” I frowned. “Is that some kind of traditional event in this village?”

“Indeed. It’s a ceremony to display your bond as a couple before the mountain god. Because of modern laws and such, you won’t be a ‘legal’ couple, but by swearing your love in front of the gods, you’ll be married in society’s eyes.”

“That sounds like an interesting tradition.” I meant it too. It piqued my curiosity.

If you handed me a map of Japan and asked me to point out where we were right now, I wouldn’t have a clue. This was a ceremony that was peculiar to this unknown part of the country and I had the chance to experience it in person. Imagine how much inspiration I could gather and pass on to Makigai Namako-sensei for *Koyagi*. It was exciting—as long as I ignored the fact that the ceremony would be a total sham.

“P-Please wait, grandfather!” Sumire suddenly called out, raising up on her haunches.

“What’s up? I’m not deaf, y’know!”

Says the dude who speaks at a billion decibels.

“He—Ooboshi-kun’s only sixteen! He’s too young for this! He’s too young for the ceremony!”

“Huh? You know people used to get married at twelve in the past, right? Who cares how old you are, as long as you’re in love.”

“He’s too young, no matter how you swing it!” Sumire slammed her hand down on the table in front of us.

This was a very familiar conversation. Nah, I was probably just imagining things.

“Don’t glare at me like that. I’m thinking about your future here. Or d’you wanna marry someone else instead?”

“W-Well, not...” Sumire swallowed and lowered herself back down. “No. I can’t marry someone else.”

“Thought not. That’s why we gotta have the Ceremony of Knots! I’ll tell the village to start getting ready!” Kou called over one of the servants who was waiting in the hallway. It only took a few whispered words for the servant to nod and disappear again.

I was starting to understand the Kageishi family more now. It was clear to me that Kou, and probably the other family members too, really cared for Sumire. It might not be an exaggeration to say they

loved her. They wanted her to be happy, and they were doing what they could to make it happen. The only problem was that they had iron-clad rules and traditions they needed to stick to.

It was just like the people whose talents were sealed away because of society's expectations. It was nobody's fault, and nobody was acting out of malice. It was just the way society and culture developed due to rules set down ages ago. Because nobody was at fault, there were those who were content to just shut up and take the path set down before them, even if it meant turning their back on their dreams. Society was based on several layers of tradition and expectation, and I couldn't think of anything less efficient.

"Ooboshi-kun. Ooboshi-kun?"

"Oh, um. Sorry. What is it, sir?" I said quickly, realizing Kou was calling my name. I couldn't let myself get lost in thought like that!

"I'll have a room prepared for you. You can stay here tonight."

"That's very generous of you, but I'm afraid I have to decline."

"Oh? Why?"

"The purpose of the Ceremony of Knots is to have our love accepted by the mountain god. In other words, I haven't been accepted as Sumire-san's husband yet. Until I have been, I don't have a right to treat this place as any sort of home. I have already booked a room at the inn, so please allow me to stay there tonight."

And that's how you twist somebody's words to get what you want. I'd much rather spend the night at the inn with people I knew than in this stuffy family's home. I made it sound like I was on Kou's side too. Maybe I'd make a good con artist.

Just as I thought, Kou's eyes lit up like a bandit eyeing a wealthy carriage.

"I like you even more now, Ooboshi-kun! Or should I say...Akiteru-kun!"

"Th-Thank you, sir."

"I can't wait till you become my official grandson!" Kou laughed. I pulled it off. I had him right where I wanted him now.

Whaddya think, Murasaki Shikibu-sensei? Pretty impressive, right?

I tried to exchange a glance with her, but...

"The Ceremony of Knots... It's over... My life...is...over..." Sumire was muttering under her breath, her expression as grave as someone who spent their entire life savings on shitcoin and lost it all overnight.

What was she so worried about? It was just a little ceremony. We had already lied and said we were engaged. Carrying out a ceremony with no legal power was basically on the same level as that, right?

And that was how I successfully made it through my visit with Kageishi Kou, the head of the Kageishi family.

“You sure have a talent for getting weird adults to like you.”

“Yup.”

Chapter 7: The Inn's Ghosts Have It In for the Guests

It was already dark by the time I got back to the inn. There were no street lamps or anything around here, so I had to use the light of my phone to guide me to the dilapidated building. It somehow looked even creepier than it did that afternoon.

To be honest, I found the cawing of unidentified birds and the donk-donk of the bamboo fountain to be kind of overboard. Everything creepy about this place was cranked up to eleven. Wait, this was a fantastic opportunity to pick up on stuff to make *Koyagi* even scarier in the shortest amount of time possible, and it was so efficient that I couldn't be happier because I wasn't even scared at all and—

"Welcome back. You must be tired."

"A ghooost!" I shrieked.

"What's the matter? You look like you've seen a ghost."

"Huh? Oh, um..."

It was just the innkeeper. Her frightful face had appeared out of nowhere. Of course I screamed! But when I looked closer, I realized it was just the deathly innkeeper we met that afternoon. I knew I committed a serious social faux-pas, but she had tried to give me a heart attack!

"You haven't been to the room yet, have you, young man? I was waiting for you so you wouldn't get lost trying to find it."

"O-Oh. Thank you."

All I needed to do was send a LIME message and Iroha or Ozu could tell me where it was. An old lady out in the sticks might not have realized that, though. I decided just to let her guide me.

"This way."

"Thank you."

I followed the innkeeper up the stairs and down the hallway, until she stopped in front of a door. The sign on the door read "Bellflower Room." I bobbed my head sheepishly.

"Thanks so much for showing me the way."

"Just doing my job, young man." The innkeeper's face crumpled up into a wrinkly smile, and she was about to turn around when she stopped suddenly. "Oh, that's right. I already told your friends, but I should warn you too. Be sure not to go into the Iris Room next door."

“Of course. Well, I wouldn’t usually go into a room we hadn’t booked anyway.”

“That room’s cursed.”

“Cursed? Cursed how?” I found myself asking; I’d only barely registered what she’d even said.

Before I realized it, the old lady was suddenly several steps away from me.

How did she manage that with her old body bent in half like that?

“Be careful! Oho ho ho!”

With those words, she was gone.

She did say “cursed,” right? She could’ve at least explained it to me before dropping a bombshell like that and just leaving. Letting out an exhausted sigh, I unlocked the Bellflower Room and stepped inside to find Iroha. Dead.

I turned on the light, illuminating the traditional room. The floor was layered with tatami, and there was a low table and soft, legless chairs. There was an open-air bath out on the large veranda. The scent of cypress trees soothed my lungs. Iroha was still dead.

I read on the information board in reception that there was a large public bath nearby, but I never expected to have our own private one too. What a luxury! I couldn’t see Ozu around. Either he was doing some exploring, or he already went off to the public bath. Speaking of baths, I needed something to relax after the stress of meeting Sumire’s grandfather.

“It’s time to soak in the tub!”

“No, it’s not! Why are you ignoring me?!” Iroha wailed, slumped against the wall by the door with a knife sticking out of her chest. I was ignoring her because this was clearly a poor attempt at a prank. “Is that really how you react to finding your beloved kouhai stabbed?!”

“It was so obviously fake. Why’s there no blood even though you were stabbed?”

“That’s the mystery you’re supposed to solve! How did I die so cleanly?”

“I guess this *is* a good place for a mysterious murder.”

We would be fine as long as no teenage detectives suddenly decided they wanted to stay here. Right?

Iroha pouted and pulled the toy knife from her chest. She had clearly just pushed it into her cleavage through the gaps between the buttons of her blouse. Having a large chest sure had its perks. Apparently.

“Ngh! I had seven different joke toys set up to fool you and everything!”

“So six, apart from the knife. That’s way too much work to put

into getting on my nerves.”

“Getting on your nerves is my life’s mission!”

“How about you find something more valuable to do with your time?” I sighed, then noticed something about the knife Iroha was now fiddling with. “Hey, I’ve seen that thing somewhere before.”

“I borrowed it from the drama club. Midori-san’s, like, one of my best friends now.”

“Right, she used it on me on the last day of school. Never thought I’d see it again.”

“By the way, Senpai, I was waiting for you for ages!”

“Huh?”

“There’s nothin’ good on TV here, and I’m running out of data on my phone ’cause it’s the end of the month. I thought I was gonna die of boredom if you didn’t show up soon! I was waiting to tease you!”

“Couldn’t you just’ve played cards with Ozu or something?”

“Playing one-on-one games with Ozuma is *torture*! Besides, he wandered off the second we checked in. Said he found something interesting or something.”

“Something caught his eye, huh? He always did kinda do whatever he wanted.”

“No, he didn’t! He only does ’cause you taught him to, Senpai!”

“Well, yeah. But he sure took it to heart.”

Back in junior high school, Ozu had had no interest in anything that wasn’t his computer, and it had led to him having a ton of misunderstandings with our classmates. I’d given him some advice. Look at things with a keener eye. Take interest in them, and investigate. It didn’t matter if you didn’t understand them. Just look at them, and form an opinion, whether it’s “Hey, this is kinda cool,” or “This math formula is dumb.”

All he needed to do was take an interest in the stuff going on around him and engage with it. That was when he started meeting new people—a whole *ton* of people, just like he was the protagonist of his very own story. The fact that it only took a small change in perspective for him to be drowning in so many new encounters only went to show that he was a likeable guy.

“Anyway! I was boooored! Super bored!” Iroha flopped herself down on the folded pile of futons and began kicking her legs wildly.

I watched her sock-clad legs flying through the air. It was then that I noticed.

“Hey, you’re wearing socks. Don’t you find being barefoot comfier?”

“Hm?” Iroha stopped kicking and stared up at her toes. I wished she’d put her feet down. I didn’t know where to look when she had her legs in the air like that. It made her skirt ride up too. “I guess it’s

'cause I'm not at home."

"My place isn't your home either, but you never bother wearing socks there."

"That's 'cause what's yours is mine!"

"Your mental gymnastics could win gold at the Olympics." I slumped down to the floor.

Talking to Iroha was exhausting. I didn't even have the energy to go for that bath anymore. Let me be clear, though. I know it might have looked like our conversation helped me relax, but in reality there was nothing positive about our interaction. Really.

"By the way, Senpai. Did ya hear?" Iroha asked, rolling around on the tatami floor like a cat.

"Hear what?"

"The innkeeper said we weren't allowed in the Iris Room."

"Oh, right." I glanced at the wall separating us from that forbidden room.

"It's totally creepy, right? And it's the room right next door! D'you think we'll see any ghosts?"

"Just because she told us not to go in there doesn't mean there's anything paranormal going on. There's no point getting your panties in a bunch."

"Aaand now you just jinxed it! You'll start drifting off or something and then you'll hear this creepy moaning from the room next door like—"

"Uuooooohhh! Woooooogh!"

"Huh?!" Iroha turned towards the wall. "D-Did you hear that, Senpai?"

"Real clever, Iroha. You need to come up with some new tricks."

I'll admit it. Iroha had had me fooled and frightened with her spooky voice quite a few times recently, but that was just because she caught me by surprise, not because I believed in the supernatural or anything like that. If I was ready for her attack and if I knew she was behind it, there was no way she'd get me. That wasn't to say she wasn't capable of producing some really creepy sounds.

"N-No, Senpai. I didn't say anything! It came from the other room —"

"I know, and it was terrifying."

"You're not listening! I swear it came from next door! Listen!" Iroha clasped her hands over her mouth, like the monkey that speaks no evil.

With her hands like that, she shouldn't be able to speak properly, right?

"I need...more...more..."

The pained moaning continued even now.

“See?! You heard that, right? Right?!”

“Wh-Whoa, Iroha. I didn’t know you mastered v-ventriloquism!”

“I didn’t do anything! Stop trying to kid yourself!”

“If you want me to believe you, then pull a more realistic prank!

All this horror and occult stuff is way too over-the-top.”

“You have to believe me, or we’re both screwed! This inn might really be cursed, you know!”

“Calm down, okay? It’s at times like these you need to be able to think clearly. Normally, the key to getting rid of the spirit lies in its words.”

“You mean we gotta listen to what it’s saying?”

“You got it. I know it’s creepy, but we’ve got no choice. Stay calm, and listen to what it’s got to say. Off you go, Iroha.” I started to push her towards the wall.

“Why me?! No way! *You* listen, Senpai!” Iroha cried, her face pale.

We scuffled, getting closer and closer to the wall in the process, until we were close enough to hear the voice clearly.

“Need more... Not enough to...”

“Eek!” Iroha started trembling and looked up at me with tearful eyes.

Her reactions were too real for this to be an act. It was rare to see her shaking and crying like this.

“I know what this is! It’s famous! The ghost that counts nine plates!”

“Bancho Sarayashiki. The story of the vengeful servant whose master tricked her into thinking she lost one of his precious plates. That’s a super old ghost story, but then, this place is kind of stuck in the past.”

“It’s gotta be her, Senpai! Listen! She’s going again!”

“Fifty-one...fifty-two...not enough...”

“That’s, uh. More than nine.”

“It’s the age of consumerism! She’s gotta have more plates now!”

“That makes no sense. Look, I really don’t think this is an actual ghost.”

My suspicions were steadily rising, especially since I was starting to realize that the voice sounded familiar. I was trying to figure it out, but my train of thought was rudely interrupted.

“You two! Get away from that wall! Don’t listen to the voice!”

I whirled around to find Ozu.

“Ozu! Where’ve you been?!”

“I went for a walk, and I found this creepy storehouse. I went to have a look, and then I saw this kinda see-through girl locked up behind some wooden bars inside.”

“You weren’t seeing things, right? Only because this sounds super

similar to the set up of a weird H-game.”

“It was real. She even told me about the rumor of the Iris Room.” Ozu walked through the room and slumped down in the massage chair on the veranda.

Iroha and I were already sitting back in our chairs, though I didn’t really notice us moving over here.

“You know that in some cultures, irises are planted in graves, right?”

“Graves...” I swallowed.

“I dunno what’s in that room. But whatever it is, it’s creepy.”

“What if... What if someone died in there or something? You know, we can probably still change our room, right?”

“L-Let’s do that! We came here to have a fun time, right? Not to get cursed for the rest of our lives!”

“It’s not that simple. There’s nowhere we can run to, unless we escape the village altogether.” Ozu looked up at the dark night sky. The moon was shining brilliantly. It was the only light source in this village without streetlamps. “There’s another rumor in this village about a cursed nursery rhyme. It’s called Bird Song.”

“Bird Song?! You don’t mean...”

“You’ve heard of it, Senpai?”

“Yeah. When we were going to the Kageishi house, we heard some kids playing and singing a song like that.”

“It’s also known as the Song of the Crying Child. If you look at the lyrics, it’s really a song about kidnapping children. Apparently, when kids go out at night, they hear that song before getting taken away somewhere.”

“So there’s this creepy room and this creepy song. It’s like there’s no escape, no matter where we go.”

“Right. I guess all we can do is try and sleep in the opposite corner where we can’t hear the spooky voice. It’ll be kinda cramped, so you two can have the futons.”

“You take one too, Ozu. You’re exhausted, right?”

“Don’t worry ’bout me. I wanna sleep out here.” Ozu switched on the massage chair. It began to whirr, and Ozu’s strained expression relaxed before our eyes. “Man, my back was so tense.”

Ozu usually worked at a desk, but he was working double time to prepare for this trip. He must’ve needed that chair’s massage badly. Anyway, if he was fine with us taking the futons, I wasn’t about to object.

“What do you wanna do, Senpai?”

“Hm...”

I couldn’t take Ozu’s words at face value. The girl he had heard all of this from was one of his typical dating-sim-protagonist encounters.

An encounter that I would therefore never have, and while I believed him when he said she was real, I wasn't able to verify that for myself. I didn't have to let my life be influenced by the words of some random person I was never going to meet.

But, well, I couldn't ignore the fact that Iroha looked so scared. I could feel her fingers trembling as they clung onto my sleeve. If I was any kind of man, it was my duty to put her at ease. That might sound sexist by modern standards, so take it as a personal principle.

"Okay. Let's sleep in the corner. Just don't keep me up, okay?"

"O-Of course I won't! Even I know this isn't the time for horsing around!"

"Good. We'll call a temporary ceasefire for the night and we'll just ignore the ghost."

"R-Right." Iroha saluted.

It was good to see that even the most annoying girl in the world knew how to be serious in the face of the supernatural. Hey, maybe I could get this ghost on my side to get Iroha off my back forever. Maybe I should learn how to speak with the dead to help run my life more efficiently.

Wait, no. If I messed up and got cursed, I'd be plagued with inefficiency. Besides, even if I were to learn such an art, there would be no guarantee that I'd have the innate spiritual power to contact spirits. Considering the benefits and risks, it would be more like a total gamble rather than a sensible investment of my time.

So I decided to give up on the whole talking-to-ghosts thing and just reaffirm that they weren't scary in the least. For now, Iroha, Ozu, and I would take our chances staking out the night in this haunted inn, praying for all we were worth that nothing spooky would happen.

Unfortunately, our prayers went unanswered.

"How could something like this happen?"

It was late at night. I didn't have a watch at hand, but if I had to guess, it had just gone two in the morning. Some would call this the witching hour. On a normal night, I would've been asleep hours ago, but right now I had my eyes wide open, and I was highly alert. After our discussion, we had taken turns going down to the public bath and enjoying the hot springs, which were surprisingly pleasant for a place with near-zero tourism. Once we were all done, we had decided to get some sleep. So far so good—but then we'd settled down to sleep.

"Mmmnghhhh. Phheemphai..."

"I can't sleep."

Kohinata Iroha, the source of my insomnia, was out like a log, and looked like she was having the sleep of her life. She fell asleep within

around twenty seconds of getting in the futon. That much was fine. Being able to fall asleep quickly was a good thing. They say that getting a good night's rest is the key to developing well. A stable sleep schedule was important to achieve efficient brain function. *That* wasn't the problem here.

The problem was that she was clinging to my arm like it was some kind of soft toy.

We had the two futons set at the opposite wall to the Iris Room, just as Ozu had suggested. I'd been all ready to close my eyes and get to sleep, when I realized Iroha was holding on to me. I don't really know how it happened, so I don't think I can really explain, but it's not even like I was tossing or turning or anything for it to end up like that.

Having just come out of the bath, she was wearing the single flimsy yukata, the sort you always get at inns like this. I didn't know for sure if she was wearing underwear or not, but I had had a few brief glimpses under the material, and seen nothing but skin. The likelihood of underwear was close to zero according to my calculations. I was a teenager at the height of puberty. It was all I could do to say a silent prayer to atone for my sins and pretend that I couldn't see anything.

"Stupid Iroha. You gotta keep your guard up when you're around guys." I pulled my arm gently out of her grasp, my heart pounding in my chest.



When I finally managed to escape from that comfortably soft trap, Iroha began to mumble in her sleep.

“No... Come...back...”

My breath caught in my throat. Iroha’s hand was searching for my arm lazily, like a child searching for its neglectful parent. I felt my chest tighten. I hadn’t realized Iroha could be so needy.

“Come...back... Don’t...”

“Iroha...”

My arm froze, allowing Iroha’s hand to find it again.

“Ah...” Iroha sighed happily, her expression softening. “I told you, Senpai. Don’t come on my back. That’s gross.”

“I’m gonna kill you, Iroha.” I snatched my arm away from her.

This time, Iroha was giggling even when I pulled away. Clearly she was pissing off the Aki in her dreams too.

Wait, didn’t this mean I won that bet we had before? The one which meant I was allowed to fondle her breasts as much as I wanted? Not that I was actually going to do it. Well, she was asleep, so maybe I couldn’t hold her responsible for interrupting mine, even if she was doing a really good job of it. She had to have an annoying genome sequence, which meant she could piss me off even when unconscious.

“What do I do now?”

The uncomfortable desire that Iroha’s defenselessness had stirred up in me had calmed down again, but sleep was still far off for me.

Maybe I’ll read an e-book or something. Reading usually makes me tired. I’ll be asleep in no time.

I got up and tiptoed quietly to the alcove where I had left my phone on charge. Then I stopped. I could hear a strange tapping noise from the other side of the wall—the Iris Room. It was tapping out a strange rhythm. Just when it sounded like the rhythm was becoming regular, the noise suddenly stopped...and then resumed again a split second later. I knew the sound was familiar somehow, but I just couldn’t work out where I had heard it before or what it was. The one thing I did know was that it was a very important sound. A sound I mustn’t forget.

The tapping stopped again and I heard a grumbling voice.

“Ugh... Aki... Aki...”

“Huh?”

Was someone calling me? I could’ve sworn I heard my name, even though it didn’t make any sense. I put my ear to the wall curiously. The tapping continued. Then...

“Aki... Aki...”

It was definitely my name.

Maybe it was a coincidence. Maybe it was just a different word

that *sounded* like my name. Either way...

"I'm not gonna be able to sleep till I figure this out now!"

Why would a ghost in an inn in a village in the middle of nowhere be calling my name? That question would plague my mind incessantly if I tried to lie back down now. Even if I did fall asleep, my sleep would be disturbed, and if that happened, my sleeping rhythm for tomorrow and the days to come would be ruined.

I was done pretending this supernatural crap wasn't scaring me. This was terrifying! I wasn't about to let fear hold me back, though. I wouldn't let this ghost continue to threaten the efficiency of my daily life by snatching my sleep away! I was going to stand up to it! No matter how terrifying it was!

I picked up my phone. Then I rifled through my bag and pulled out ten talismans at random. That should do it. Keeping my footsteps light, I left the Bellflower Room and moved into the dark hallway. It was so dark, I couldn't even see my hand in front of my face. I used the light of my phone to illuminate the way. It was just enough to allow me to walk properly. Even just standing out here was making me tremble with fear. I slapped at my trembling legs with my hands to try and stop them, before taking a deep breath and stepping in front of the Iris Room.

"Keep Out!"

"Danger! Do not open!"

"Cursed!"

"Do not disturb!"

"Stay away!"

"Three days left to live!"

Creepy warning messages were plastered all over the door. No doubt about it. This room was cursed. I froze in front of the cascade of warnings. Even as I stood there, I could still hear the irregular tapping noise. I could still hear my name. I couldn't turn back now. I gulped and raised my fist to knock on the door.

"Little bird, little bird..."

I froze again. I could hear a young girl's cheerful singing. It wasn't coming from the Iris Room. It was from a room farther down the hallway, hidden in the darkness. The door was labeled "Canary Room."

It was the dead of night. The witching hour. Even adults were supposed to be asleep this late. Who the heck would be singing? Not to mention the song sounded awfully familiar...

"Little bird, little bird, the little bird merchant is here.

Little bird, little bird, he has a crying child for sale.

And our parents in the east, the sun is in the west,

*It's time for our afternoon snack.
And our parents in the east, the sun is in the west,
It's time for our afternoon snack."*

It was that cursed nursery rhyme. What the hell?! Why the heck was someone singing this stupid song when I was already shitting bricks?! Was the merchant here to take me away because I was trying to figure out where the eerie moaning was coming from? Bastard. Was trying to creep me out like this really that fun?

On top of being scared, I was annoyed. It was a familiar feeling, like smoldering ashes in the pit of my stomach. I often felt it when a certain somebody was around: Iroha. She had taken to scaring me recently and found my reactions entertaining. So it was the same deal with this ghost, huh?

That anger got the cogs (i.e. the dopamine) in my brain working again. I wasn't gonna let that ghost get away with this! I'd find out what was behind this ghost, whether it liked it or not. Just you wait! It could curse me if it wanted. I'd even let it kill me—if it could manage it. And then what?! I would experience a death reminiscent of a character from *Koyagi*! I would go through the same experience as a video game character for real! I would become part of the game world! It was every nerd's fantasy! If that dumb ghost thought it was punishing me, it had another thing coming! Ha ha ha ha!

I knocked on the door to the Iris Room without giving myself time to think things through.

You're in there, right?! Get out here, Casper the shitty ghost!

The tapping noise stopped. So did the whispers of my name. Slowly, slowly, the door opened with a creak...

My jaw dropped.

Red eyes glinted at me through the crack in the door. I stared back at them, knowing I was staring into the abyss of death.

The skin of its cheeks was paper thin. Its hair was white as ash. Red, bloodshot eyes, and white, pallid flesh. What was I feeling right now?

One word: regret.

I already knew it was too late, but I longed to turn back time just a couple of minutes so that I could make the choice to ignore the creepy voice instead of chasing it. I stared into those eyes for a few long moments, unable to look away.

"AAAAAAAAAAAAARGH!"

"EEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEK!"

Two screams. One of them was laced with the fear of death (that was mine). It was an impressive sound, if I do say so myself. So was the other scream. If you've ever seen a horror movie, or a movie about

sharks, you'll know that they sometimes cut away from the scene of the person getting eaten, so the scream has to be convincing enough to let you know they're dying. This scream was convincing.

I didn't get why the ghost was screaming, though.

"Chirp, chirp! What's going on?" The door to the Canary Room opened to reveal a (chirping?) girl.

"Senpai, you okay?!"

"Somethin' fun happen?"

Iroha and Ozu leaped out of the Bellflower Room.

"EEEEEEK! AAAAAAH! PERVERT! GET AWAY FROM ME!"

"I'm not a pervert! Don't act like you haven't been winding me up all night!"

"Chirp! Stay away from her, you pervert!"

"*Stop chirping!* You're a human being for God's sake!"

"*You* get away from Senpai, you weird-ass ghost!"

"The hell's going on, Aki?"

"One at a time! Stop talking over each other!"

Chaotic didn't even begin to describe it. I had no idea what was happening. Where did the pervert accusations come from? Why should I stay away from this ghost when it was calling for—huh?

"Wait. Mashiro?"

"Aki?"

The ghost and I stopped and stared at each other.

Her eyes were bloodshot, her face pale and her cheeks sullen, but she wasn't a ghost after all. She was a girl I knew very well.

"Don't tell me..."

"A-Aki? What are you doing here?"

Tsukinomori Mashiro. My neighbor, my cousin, and my fake girlfriend.

We gathered in the Bellflower Room to try and work out what was going on. We had been so loud that the innkeeper came to find out what was going on, but when we apologized she just laughed it off. Mashiro's group and our group were the only ones staying at the inn right now, so there weren't any other guests to disturb in the first place.

I guess that's what you get when you set up an inn in the middle of nowhere. It was a wonder how they managed to stay in business.

Anyway, like I was saying, we were all in the Bellflower Room, sitting around the table. Me, Iroha, Ozu, Mashiro, and the weird chirping girl.

"So, uh, you were staying in the Iris Room, Mashiro?"

"Y-Yeah."

“What a weird coincidence. When you said you weren’t coming to the beach, I thought you’d be staying at home.”

“That’s my line. There’s no beach here, so what are you guys doing here?”

“Our plans changed at the last second, and I had to come see Sumire-sensei’s family. Y’know, to greet the Kageishi head as her fiancé.”

“Huh?”

“H-Her *fake* fiancé. There’s no need for the death glare!”

It was even more terrifying when her eyes were bloodshot like that. If SAN points existed in real life, mine would be close to zero after all the insane stuff that had happened today. But my sanity wasn’t the main concern here.

“Why are you here, Mashiro-senpai? And who’s that tiny, adorable girl with you?”

Iroha had asked the question before I could. The biggest mystery of all was the girl nonchalantly sitting with us. She looked young, somewhere at the older end of elementary school, or the younger end of junior high school. She had the kind of golden hair you normally only see on westerners, tied up stylishly and neatly. She wore a frilly gothic outfit, despite it being the middle of the night, and she was carrying a parasol, despite us being indoors.

She was...unique, to put it mildly.

The girl put a hand to her ear in response to Iroha’s question. “Ooh? Who was it that just said I was the cutest chick in the whole world? I belong to all my fans, you know! Only a bird brain would try to win me over with sweet talk, chirp!”

Iroha gave me an unimpressed glance. *Don’t look at me! I think she’s insane too!*

Who was she, and where had she come from? Why was she so damn cringey? It was painful enough to look at her, especially when she struck a pose every time she said “chirp.”

“Come on, work with me. Usually only my fans get to see this side of me! Chirp, chirp! You’re making me get my feathers in a twist, chirp!”

“Your fans? Are you an underground idol or something?”

“Huh?! You’ve never heard of me? I’m Canary! That’s my name, so don’t wear it out, chirp!”

“Oh my God, you’re so annoying! Senpai, help! She’s so annoying, I’m gonna lose my niche!”

“Chill, Iroha. I’m just as freaked out as you are. I never thought I’d meet anyone more ‘gifted’ than you.”

The way she moved. Her poses. Her voice. It was like she had engineered everything down to the finest detail to be as irritating as

possible.

“Clean out your ears, because I’m only chirping this once!” Canary winked and brought a peace sign right up next to her face. “With me, you’re guaranteed a second print run! I can make any story shine! Chirp, chirp! Whether comedy or tragedy, I’ll take your work under my wing and make it the best it can be! My name is Kiraboshi Kanaria, and I’m the sweet seventeen editing star of UZA Bunko! You can call me Canary, chirp! It’s wonderful to meet you!”

She chose to give her self-introduction through song.

Wait. I’ve heard that introduction somewhere before.

I frowned. It only vaguely rang a bell, but there was definitely something to it. Kiraboshi Kanaria. Kiraboshi Canary. Wait.

She mentioned UZA Bunko, right?

“Ah! I remember now! You’re Makigai Namako-sensei’s editor, Canary-san! His work was all the rage on the Internet a while back!”

“You got it, Eagle Eye!”

UZA Bunko’s editors were famous for being prolific on social media, but Kiraboshi Kanaria was special, even among them. Not only did she have a huge social media presence, but she hosted all kinds of events, like live concerts and autograph meets; sold CDs; and made a big name for herself as an “editing idol.” This girl—well, technically she was an adult, so let’s call her a woman—caused the biggest stir of all.

Her approach to her work received mixed reviews, but there was no doubt about the level of effort she was putting in. She also had a fantastic talent for scouting out hit novels, with most of her series getting second print runs, and none of them getting canceled.



She was being touted as the next editor-in-chief, and her talent was undeniable.

“But wait, what is Makigai Namako-sensei’s editor doing here? And why are you with her, Mashiro?”

“Um, uh... Um...” Mashiro’s face was pale as she looked between me and Canary.

“It’s obvious, chirp! It’s because Mashiro-chan is Maki—”

“Mackinac Bridge!”

“Of Michigan fame?!”

Mashiro reached out and slapped her hand over Canary’s mouth faster than you could say “Big Mac.” Canary fluttered her arms desperately, but Mashiro’s grip stayed strong.

“Mashiro-chan! What are you doing, chirp! Okay! I give up! Gah!”

“The truth is, Canary-san—Canary is my sister.”

“Your sister?”

“Y-Yes. I came on a trip with my sister. That’s all.”

“I didn’t know you had a sister.”

I had visited her place a lot when we were kids. My memories were fuzzy, but I could remember the basics. There was Mashiro and her brother. He was my cousin, my friend, and—as far as I knew—Mashiro’s only sibling.

“I do,” Mashiro said.

“Really?”

Was it normal to forget your own family’s makeup? Canary couldn’t be her sister. So who was she to Mashiro?

“P-Please don’t be alarmed, Aki. She’s my sister, but...she used to be my brother.”

“Seriously? You had a sex change?”

I didn’t have anything against it. I was just surprised. I’d been wondering how Mashiro’s brother was doing lately, but I never expected him to change genders.

“H-Hey, Mashiro-chan! That doesn’t make a lick of sense, chirp! What are you—”

“Mmm!”

Free from Mashiro’s hand, Canary started to raise her voice, but Mashiro cut her off with a series of winks.

What was that all about?

Canary’s face lit up. “That’s right, chirp! I’m Mashiro-chan’s brother! I used to be a wild crow on a motorcycle, but now I’m as pretty as a peacock, and an idol to boot!”

“Bullshit.”

“HOW’D YOU KNOW?!”

“He had a bad bicycle crash as a kid and never rode again. A

motorcycle's basically a motorized bike. There's no way he'd start riding one of those."

"What?! I didn't know that, chirp! How was I even supposed to pretend to be someone I've never met, you silly goose?!"

"I-I'm sorry." Mashiro shrank back.

It was clear now who the dominant one was, and it made me realize something. They weren't sisters, let alone friends. So why were they staying together in this backwater inn?

One was UZA Bunko's star editor, and the other was Mashiro, who was busier than she'd ever been. Something Sumire said popped into my head.

"Apparently they get a lot of folks who like decrepit places like that, or manga artists cutting it close to their deadlines who want to rid themselves of distraction. This place is totally distraction-free, because there's nothing to do."

The answer was obvious when you put all the pieces together.

"You don't need to hide it anymore, Mashiro. I already know."

"Huh?! W-Wait. No, you've got it wrong!" Mashiro waved her hands in front of her hurriedly.

The calluses on her hands and fingertips hadn't escaped my notice. In fact, they only confirmed my beliefs. Her pale, tired face. Her bloodshot eyes. Her worn-out fingers. They all pointed to the same answer.

"You've been writing a novel right, Mashiro? You came on this trip with your editor from UZA Bunko so that you could focus on it."

"N-No, that's not..." Mashiro trailed off.

Mashiro was bad at hiding things. She had no poker face whatsoever, and it was easy to get her to admit the truth. Since she was unable to refute my suspicions, it was almost certain I was right.

Mashiro's classmates at her old school had found out she had been writing a novel, and she didn't have much confidence in her work to start with. That must have been why she had been keeping this a secret from us. It was a secret she kept only for herself, not even sharing it with the 05th Floor Alliance.

"Don't worry. I'm not gonna blame you for keeping it a secret. That's entirely up to you, so I don't have a right to comment on it, but there's no point in standing your ground anymore. Not when I've already figured it all out."

"Aki..." Mashiro clasped her tiny hands together in front of her chest. "Are you sure you don't think less of me? I mean, I never said anything, and I kept it a secret for so long because I didn't want you or anyone else to know that I'm writing such dumb, delusional stuff..."

"It's not dumb. Not if it's got the seal of approval from a professional editor. It's a real product with market value. It's

something to be proud of.” I smiled at her, as gently as I could. Mashiro had a tendency to be too hard on herself, so it was important to reassure her like this. “Congratulations, Mashiro. You got a proper editor. Not just any editor either, but the same editor as Makigai Namako-sensei! I’m sure your novel’s gonna be a bestseller!”

“Huh?”

“Y’know, I never thought you’d be going for an amateur novelist prize, much less that you had yourself an editor.”

“Huuh?”

“And from UZA Bunko too! It’s like you’re Makigai Namako-sensei’s kouhai!”

“Huuuh?!”

“When did you start? Y’know, I thought you’d just spend your summer vacation writing blog posts or something—”

“Wait a second.”

“What?”

“You think I’m aiming to be an author?”

“Yeah. Well, not anymore, since you’ve made it now. Or are you technically an amateur until your first book gets published? I guess that’s all semantics really.”

“It’s got nothing to do with semantics! It’s, um...” Mashiro put a hand to her head in thought. After a short moment, she tugged at Canary’s sleeve. “Come with me.”

“What’s the matter, chirp?”

Mashiro and Canary huddled together in one corner of the room and began whispering to each other.

Iroha whispered in my ear. “What are they whisperin’ about? Is she that desperate to keep it a secret?”

“Maybe. Maybe I should’ve kept pretending I didn’t know anything.”

“But you wanted to honestly praise her for doing it, right?”

“Stop reading my mind.”

“Ha ha! Sorry, but it’s too easy to see right through you! You sure are a good guy.”

“Stop bullying me.”

I didn’t do anything worthy of being called a “good guy.” Mashiro wasn’t even an Alliance member. She was a girl I was in a fake relationship with *for* the Alliance. Praising her for her work had no benefit for the Alliance, nor for the efficiency of my personal success. Perhaps Iroha thought it was “kind” of me to praise her just because I felt like it, rather than because it benefited me.

I had no involvement in her getting herself an editor, and I never gave her any sort of writing advice. This was something Mashiro had done entirely on her own; an opportunity she had grabbed with her

own two hands.

“Even dogs or cats can appreciate it when someone’s worked hard. It’s not like I’ve helped her in any way. I just said some words. You can’t call me a ‘good guy’ just for that.”

“Okay, grumpy guts! Welp, I thought you might say something like that. That’s what I love about you!” Iroha grinned.

I looked away, unable to keep her gaze out of embarrassment. Luckily, Mashiro and Canary were done with their super-secret meeting too, and were pattering back to us.

“We’ve decided. I’m a new novelist aiming to debut, and this is my editor.”

“Sometimes, I like to find a new fledgling writer who’s just missed out on a prize to help them win the next one, chirp! The early bird catches the worm and all that! I recognized Mashiro-chan’s talent, so I scouted her and offered to be her editor!”

Mashiro and Canary gave their explanations in perfect sync.

So I was right.

“But, Maki—Uh, Mashiro-chan’s been close to the deadline now with no progress at all! That’s why I took her on this trip to the usual inn to get those creative juices flowing, chirp!”

“The usual inn?”

“Like all good editors, I have a long list of inns which make excellent spaces to coop up authors who are struggling to find the motivation to finish those manuscripts! The inn and spooky atmosphere at Kageishi Village fit Mashiro-chan’s style perfectly, chirp!”

“So you’re telling me that the innkeeper’s warning and all those notes on the Iris Room door were—”

“I asked her to make sure no one would distract Mashiro-chan, chirp! She needed to focus!”

“And the Canary Room?”

“It’s a pain to reserve a room every time I wanna take a writer here, so I reserved it for a whole year with the change I scraped together! They let me pick the name myself, chirp!”

“What about the nursery rhyme I heard from there?”

“One of my writers wanted to put an original nursery song in his work, and that’s what I came up with, chirp! The kids here liked the song about the little birdie so much that they started singing it themselves! *I* was singing it because I was proofreading that passage, chirp!”

“And now everything makes sense!”

Now that every creepy phenomenon had been explained, the tension drained from my body. Kiraboshi Kanaria (AKA Canary) was a professional editor and regular visitor to Kageishi Village. She mingled

with the locals enough to influence their culture.

I was a moron for ever thinking that a nursery rhyme could be cursed.

“You were really fooled for a second, weren’t you, Aki? Funny, since you’re usually so down-to-earth.”

“Don’t tell me you knew what was happening all along, Ozu?”

“I mean, common sense tells you that ghosts don’t exist. The whole story from the girl in the cage? I just thought it would make good inspiration for *Koyagi*.”

“You’re the worst, Ozuma! I’m on Senpai’s side for once!”

“Why? You should be thanking me.” Ozu grinned. “If I hadn’t told you guys about the ghost, you wouldn’t have slept in the same futon.”

“Wh—What’s that supposed to mean?!”

“Don’t tell me that’s the *whole* reason you told us that story?”

“Hey, you can’t blame me for wanting you two to get along, right?” There was a cunning edge to his smile, but other than that it was the same charming, princely grin he always had.

I couldn’t underestimate him. He had his own goals to fulfill, and he wasn’t about to skimp on the mental energy to achieve them. He always said he hoped I would marry Iroha, and assuming that wasn’t a joke, he probably had more schemes like this up his sleeve.

“Well, as long as this place isn’t haunted for real, I guess we’re good. At least we can get some sleep now.”

“Wait a second.”

“What’s the matter, Mashiro?” I turned to look at her.

She was looking at the floor, her arms trembling. “You slept in the same futon? What does that mean exactly?”

The room temperature dropped by a couple degrees. Mashiro’s entire body was emanating an icy chill, and her eyes were hot with bloodlust.

“W-Wait, I can explain. It was a total accident. Iroha tosses and turns a lot in her sleep, right? She just happened to end up in my futon.”

“Huh? You pulled me into your futon, Senpai? Does that mean we —”

“It means nothing! And get your hand out of the trash. What are you looking for?!”

“Evidence! Duh!”

“There won’t be any evidence! You shouldn’t be rooting around in garbage in the first place. You’re a high schooler, not a garbage collector!”

Mashiro let out a frustrated groan, puffed out her cheeks, and clung tightly to my arm. “I’m going to sleep in the same room as Aki too!”

Looks like Iroha sparked the flames of competition.

Mashiro had nothing to worry about. It wasn't like there was anything between Iroha and me.

"I wanted to come to the beach, but I had to work. Now that I can see how much fun you guys are having, I've changed my mind. Let me stay in this room with you. Just for one—eep!"

"Mashiro-chan! Chirp!" Canary grabbed Mashiro by the scruff of her neck, who jumped in response.

Mashiro turned around, trembling. "I-It's already so late. Can't I just sleep here?"

"Nope! You have to go back to your room and peck away at your manuscript!"

"Nooo! Let go!" Mashiro wailed.

"We're heading back for the night, chirp! We can chat some more when this one's work is done!"

"Uh, bye."

It was amazing how much strength Canary had in that tiny frame of hers. Mashiro was flailing wildly, but her editor had no trouble dragging her to the door and opening it.

Canary paused and turned around. "Your name was Aki-kun, right? Can I ask you a question?"

"Huh? Oh, sure."

"Mashiro-chan told me you were making a game as part of a team called the 05th Floor Alliance, and that Makigai Namako-sensei writes your scenarios."

"C-Canary-san, what are you—"

"Keep your beak shut, Mashiro-chan! I'm trying to have a conversation with the nice man!"

"But—"

"So, Aki-kun? Is that right?"

"Y-Yes, it is. We're really grateful for his help."

Mentally, I was breaking out into a cold sweat. Would she be mad at us for daring to ask one of her star authors for help? I clenched my fists, ready for her to chew us out.

"Cheep, cheep! No need to look so grim! I'm mad that you're taking away his precious time, sure, but I'm not about to peck your ears off for it! If only I was strong enough to cage him, I could have him all to myself...but that's on me! I just wanted to ask something."

"What's that?"

"What can you offer him in return for helping your Alliance out?"

I stared. The smile on her face was sweet and innocent, but her question pierced through my chest like a needle.

"I'm sure Makigai Namako-sensei has his reasons for helping you guys out. Maybe he just likes the idea of the project or something. I

dunno. I was just wondering what *you* can offer *him*.”

“W-Well...”

It was a question I had thought of before, but one I stubbornly refused to recognize.

Ozu needed us because he was unable to create something by himself, due to his lack of empathy and understanding of other people and their needs. Murasaki Shikibu-sensei needed us because she was forced to teach by her family, and couldn't make a living from her illustration work. Iroha needed us because her mother blocked her path to becoming an actor, and she had no other way to train in or even express her passion.

Only Makigai Namako-sensei was different. He was already a professional author, and I still didn't know why he wanted to help us. He did get his share of the app's profits like the rest of us, and I was paying him for his manuscripts, but it was undeniable that he would make more money and advance his career more by publishing a single new volume of his original work. Maybe he helped us out as a favor, or maybe it was nothing more than a whim. Either way, the fact remained that I took him far too much for granted.

“If your Alliance wants to keep borrowing Makigai Namako-sensei,” Canary thrust the end of her parasol in my face, “you should think about what you can do for him. UZA Bunko—No, *I*—promise that he'll be wildly successful and hold more prestige than you can shake a feather at. His name will be known worldwide, and his works will be transformed into Hollywood movies.”

She was sure dreaming big. There wasn't a hint of hesitation in her eyes either. She believed in him, and she believed in herself. She believed in the world: that it would recognize Makigai Namako-sensei's talent. She wasn't bluffing. She believed with her whole heart.

I had looked into Kiraboshi Kanaria's background before I asked Makigai Namako-sensei to work with us. I read her essay back then: *The War of the Words: How to Create a Star*. It covered how to spot potential in new authors, how to polish their talents, how to market them, and how to get their work adapted into a manga or anime series. At first glance, its contents seemed way too superficial for what was supposed to be a formal essay, but she certainly didn't beat around the bush when it came to making her main points.

In fact, I had read it again and again. It was a handy reference for my own role within the Alliance. According to the back cover of the essay, all of her authors needed second print runs for their work, several of them had earned adaptations in the form of anime, drama CDs, and manga, and right now the works she edited had published over thirty million copies between them.

Her results spoke for themselves. She had to be around thirty

years old to have accomplished all of that, which was kind of off-putting considering how she dressed, but whatever. There was no doubt about her talent.

“Think hard, okay? Or we’ll be taking *all of him* for ourselves!” Canary shot me an innocent smile, but her statement was laced with a determination hotter than any chili powder. “Don’t be a sitting duck, Aki-kun. You and I are rivals.”

With that, she took Mashiro and left the room. I stared after them in silence.

“You okay, Senpai?” Iroha asked anxiously.

“I guess.”

“You don’t need to worry, okay? I can tell from your LIME conversations that Makigai-sensei really considers you guys his friends. I don’t think he’ll drop out or—”

“Thanks. That’s not what I’m worried about, though. To be honest, Canary’s kinda right.”

I’d met so many inspiring adults in my short life.

Tsukinomori Makoto, president and CEO of Honeyplace Works. He led an entire organization, and there was no way I could compete with him. Amachi Otoha, president and CEO of Tenchido. She found success using only the most efficient methods, and was a talented marketer and data scientist. Someone else I could only dream of comparing to. Kiraboshi Kanaria, a woman whose directing skills were at a level I could never hope to achieve. Not as I was now. But she was a leading figure in the field we were aiming for. One day, I had to surpass her.

“She’s opened my eyes. I have to think.”

“Senpai?” Iroha’s anxious gaze only served to deepen my determination.

I couldn’t take the Alliance we had now for granted. If Ozu, Sumire, or Iroha ever grew to the point they didn’t need it anymore, then I needed to offer them some kind of benefit to get them to stay. Otherwise, I was out of a job. I couldn’t just use my position as their “friend” to take advantage of their talents. Coming up with a reason for Makigai Namako-sensei to stay was just a practice run for what would inevitably happen with the other members.

I also needed to think about what to do here, in Kageishi Village.

My aim was to get closer to Kageishi Kou, the head of the Kageishi family. Now that I had made a good impression on him, I needed to make the most efficient move to ensure Sumire’s happiness. If I managed it, Sumire could make a name for herself as Murasaki Shikibu-sensei, an independent illustrator. She wouldn’t need to wait for us to reach Honeyplace Works anymore. There was no guarantee that she would choose to stay with the Alliance, but as her producer,

it was my duty to do what was best for her.

I would make sure that tomorrow's Ceremony of Knots would go off without a hitch. Then, once I earned the full extent of Kageishi Kou's trust, I'd get Sumire out of her teaching job once and for all.

"Hey, I'm in this with you till the very end, Aki. No matter what happens."

"I know. It's just..."

"You don't want to rely on words alone."

"That sounds way cooler than I would've put it. I just don't think it's smart to put your full trust in a relationship which doesn't have an equal measure of give and take."

"If you say so. I always did like the way you think, Aki."

Interlude: Mashiro and Canary

“Why did you say all that stuff to Aki?”

It was late at night. So late, the sun was on the verge of rising again. We were in the Iris Room. I was still typing out my novel as I glanced over at my editor, who was in the corner sipping tea and staring at her tablet. My heart was still pounding. When Canary-san suddenly started talking about Makigai Namako in front of Aki, I was terrified he might realize it was me.

“Hmmm.” Canary-san paused and considered my question. The next second, she struck a stylish pose. “You gotta make your exit as meaningful as possible! That’s how you leave a cool impression!”

“That’s dumb.”

“Squawk! Who’s supposed to be in charge here?” Canary-san hugged her knees in a fake show of shock, tracing sad faces on the floor with a finger. “Calm down. I’m in junior high school, remember? Junior high school forever... I’m gonna be young and famous forever...”

Hold on, she wasn’t faking anything. She was genuinely hurt. I guess I learned something new about her. I didn’t realize she could be so sensitive about this kind of thing, especially since she was so accomplished.

“Y’know, I just thought Aki-kun should remember how lucky he is. He’s really found a golden goose in you.”

“Who are you calling a goose? Wanna die?”

“Whoa, whoa, it was just a figure of speech! You’re a writer, aren’t you? You’re supposed to be up to scratch with these things. Also, you seriously need to hold back on the death threats.” Canary-san took a deep breath. “Remember back when you got feathers in your brain and couldn’t write anything but chicken feed, chirp?”

“Ngh...”

“That was because of Aki-kun, right? I wasn’t about to let him get away with ruining my author, chirp!”

“You’re... You’re right.”

I couldn’t deny anything when it came to Aki. There was a time when my feelings for him were so overwhelming that they affected my work. I wrote so many trashy manuscripts without even realizing how bad they were. I couldn’t think back on them without my face bursting into flames. I wanted all of that to stay buried in the past.

“After that, I kept a close eye on this Aki.”

“What?”

“He’s far from being a pro, but he’s great at directing your writing for *Koyagi*.”

“Really?”

“Really really. Once I overthrow UZA Bunko’s management in five years and seize power in my talons, I’ll take control of every last bookstore in the entire world! And I’m gonna have him help me do it. Chirp.”

“What? But Aki only cares about the Alliance.”

“That’s why I’m getting him to do some thinking. What can the Alliance really offer you and its other members? And is that really the path he should take?”

“You’re trying to confuse him so he’ll come and join UZA Bunko?”

“Please, you’re making it sound way too devilish! I just think he’s got talent, so I want him to lend me a wing.” Canary-san wiggled, feigning innocence.

She wasn’t about to fool me.

“Don’t break up the Alliance. If you do, I’ll stop writing.”

“I’m so sorry! What was I thinking! I’m sorry, I’m sorry! I’ll never say anything like that again! Please forgive me!” Canary-san cried out—in her normal voice. “Look, I’m not trying to force the Alliance apart, chirp! But if Aki-kun doesn’t have a good answer for the question I asked him, it’s gonna crack by itself.”

“What do you mean?”

“I don’t think you’d get it even if I explained, chirp. Leading a flock like that takes a lot of work. It’s complicated stuff.”

I stayed silent.

“If Aki-kun can come up with a good answer, then the Alliance will keep going. If not, I’ll take him. How does that sound? I’m not a bad egg at all!”

“I guess that’s okay...”

“I’m doing this for you too, chirp.”

“Huh?” I blinked at Canary-san in confusion.

“I know why you chose to fly with the Alliance. There’s one very simple answer, chirp!” She raised a finger and shot me a perfect wink, a gesture she must’ve practiced millions of times. “It’s because you’re in love with Aki-kun! You know, he might even marry you if you swing it so that it’s in the Alliance’s best interests!”

I didn’t need a mirror to know how red my face was right now. I could feel how hot it was. Where did marriage come into all this?

“M-Marry me? I wouldn’t wanna do that if...if it’s all part of some scheme.”

“Really?”

“Of course not! Well...” I paused, and my voice became weaker. “I don’t think I would, anyway.”

I couldn’t deny that I was really jealous when I heard Sumire-sensei was going to be his fake fiancée. I wanted to be close to Aki, even if that proximity came from dishonest or superficial reasons.

Hold on.

Maybe I could use my second identity as Makigai Namako to my advantage. What if I revealed my identity, and said I’d only continue to write for the Alliance if Aki married me? He might seriously consider it.

Or what if I used my name as Makigai Namako to publicly disparage the 05th Floor Alliance? The Alliance would lose its reputation, be forced to fold, and Aki would be free. He could come over and work for UZA Bunko, and he’d have the time to reconsider my confession.

Wait! That’s horrible!

Aki had good reason for dedicating so much of his life to the Alliance. I couldn’t ignore those feelings for my own selfish motives, no matter how much I loved him or wanted him to notice me. Not only that, but I valued the contact I had with him via Makigai Namako and the Alliance. I didn’t want to just throw all that away!

I shook my head to clear it and turned back to the keyboard, typing as fast as I could.

“Y-You’re distracting me from work. Get out of here.”

“Sure thing, lovebird. Keep at it, yeah? I’ll catch you later, chirp!” Canary-san waved a hand at me before leaving the room.

Even after I was left alone, I failed to find my focus.

Chapter 8: My Teacher Has It In for Rationality

It was morning. Ten o'clock, to be precise. I didn't get to bed until late after yesterday's chance encounter with Mashiro, so I was only waking up now. At least it wasn't a school day, or I'd be letting out a piercing scream, my hair would turn white all at once, and I would die on the spot. That might sound like an overreaction, but that's how much I hate being late.

"AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH!"

Yup, that's the sort of scream I'd let out in my final moments. It'd be kind of ironic if, after all the effort we went through to show that this place wasn't haunted, my friends woke up to find my disfigured corpse.

I decided to go grab some breakfast, even if it was a little late for that. Maybe it was more like brunch at this time of day. Anyway, as my mind argued semantics, I got up and made my way to the bathroom, where I bumped into Iroha. Her face was pale.

"D-Did you hear that just now, Senpai?"

"Don't be silly, Iroha. It's summer vacation. There's no reason for me to scream, my hair to go white, or for me to drop dead."

"You're the one being silly! Wake up already!" Iroha slapped my cheeks lightly. Her cool touch snapped my brain in gear at once.

"Huh?! Who was that screaming just now?"

"So you finally made it back to Earth, huh?"

"I'm always down to earth. Unlike some airheads I know."

"Ouch. You don't remember spacing out literally two seconds before I slapped you, huh? That's kinda worrying, y'know."

"Look, I don't know what you're talking about. Wait, you slapped me? You trying to start a fight?"

"You only hear what you wanna hear, huh?"

"You guys sound like you're havin' fun," Ozu remarked, lifting himself out of the massage chair. "That voice came from downstairs."

"Maybe it was the front entrance. Let's go check it out."

"Yes, boss!" Iroha gave me a hearty salute.

"Right." Ozu nodded.

Hopefully we wouldn't run downstairs to find a murder or anything.

When we got there, we found the innkeeper sitting on her rear on

the floor and trembling. She was looking right at Sumire, who was lying face down in a pool of red liquid.

“S-Sumire-chan-sensei?”

“Sh-She’s dead?”

Iroha and I stood there, completely shocked. Though we couldn’t see the body’s face, we knew it was Sumire from her hair and stature. The goopy red liquid continued to pour out from her body. If I had to guess, it was coming from her stomach and chest. Assuming it was blood, it was enough for her to be dead already.

“Sumire-sensei...” Ozu murmured, staggering towards her. “H-Hey, get up. You can’t just die on us.”

He hooked his foot under her body and rolled her over slowly, as though she were nothing more than a dried-up turtle at the side of the road.

Ozu, that’s gross! I didn’t know you were such a monster!

“Ugh...” Sumire’s shoulders heaved with sobs as she was turned face-up.

She’s alive!

“Hey, are you okay?!” I dashed up to Sumire and helped her sit up. “Iroha, get an ambulance!”

“On it!”

If I remember correctly, you’re not supposed to move the victim too much at a time like this. Do I need to stop the bleeding first? There’s way too much sticky red liquid on her clothes. We needed towels, and lots of them. There should have been a ton at the public bath... Huh?

My mind was racing at full speed, when all of a sudden I noticed something. It was down on the floor at our feet, in the spot where Sumire collapsed. Four cartons of tomato juice, all crushed flat. Plus, now that I looked closer, Sumire’s clothes were all intact, and there were no signs she’d been stabbed or anything.

“Oh my God! Why would you try and trick us like this?!”

Sumire wailed. “Stop it! I need those muscles to do paperwork!”

I jabbed my toes into the pressure points in her sides to fix her up. With a pathetically lewd look on her face, Sumire writhed in agony. I swear she had a quota of how many times she needed to make that face in a week.

“Senpai?! What the hell are you doing?! That’s gross! I didn’t know you were such a monster!”

“No, Iroha! Look. This isn’t blood. It’s tomato juice.”

“Wh—Tomato juice?” Iroha looked down at the floor and finally spotted the cartons of juice, squashed flatter than a frog on the freeway. “Why the heck would you do this, Sumire-chan-sensei?!”

“Nooooo! Not the backs of my ears! They’re sensitive! That tickles! Aaaaaaaaargh!”

Iroha tickled everywhere she could get her hands on, from Sumire's ears to the backs of her knees. Sumire squirmed and rolled around in agony with that same lewd look on her face. I know it's annoying to hear about that face all the time, but just let me off for now. This was her fair punishment for making us worry so much.

"N-No... I wanted...wanted to give this to Iroha-chan to apologize!"

"Apologize?"

"I brought her favorite tomato juice to appease her! But the threshold here was way higher than I thought. I tripped and fell, and the juice... Ugh! Iroha-chan, you've gotta hate me, right? I mean, I'm totally fit to be a wife now!" Sumire buried her face in her hands and sobbed.

"I have no idea what you're saying. Plus, isn't it usually 'unfit' to be a wife?" Iroha looked at me desperately.

Don't look at me like I understand what's going on in her head!

"Didn't Aki tell you?" Sumire gasped between sobs. "They're making us do the Ceremony of Knots."

"The Ceremony of Knots? Never heard of it. Sounds like fun, though. Why didn't you say anything, Senpai?"

"Because I have no idea what it's supposed to be myself. It's not even legally binding, so I didn't think it was a big deal."

I didn't know why Sumire was throwing a tantrum about it like a kid who didn't want to go back to school. It was nothing more than a traditional event passed down through the generations in some secluded area of Japan. It was just a formality, one we could get out of the way nice and quickly. Basically, more trouble than it was worth to explain to Iroha and Ozu.

Sumire's eyes flew open. "Not a big deal?! *Are you kidding?!*"

"H-Hey, get away from me! At least wipe the juice off your clothes first!"

"You don't know what you're saying, Aki! The Ceremony of Knots is... It's..." Sumire choked out, bringing her face closer to me even as I tried to push her away. She fixed her gaze on me intently, an unquenchable fire burning in her eyes. "The Ceremony of Knots is absolute. It's the most cursed wedding-style ceremony in history."

I stared at her. I blinked. I stared at her. I blinked again.

What?

"The Ceremony of Knots is a traditional event in the village. It's totally cursed, and it's said that the man and woman who go through with it are bound together no matter what!" Sumire explained again, once we were back in the Bellflower Room.

We had moved up here because we risked being seen by a passing villager if we'd stayed by the entrance. We couldn't just stand around in a public place and speak ill of this community's traditions. It was a simple matter of social awareness. I guess you could make the point that we shouldn't be speaking badly of it anywhere, but that's more manners than awareness.

Iroha laughed as she rolled around on top of her folded futon. "It's cursed? That's hilarious! Sounds like a pretty twisted god who'd curse you when you were trying to declare your eternal love for each other."

"It's not a problem for real couples. But we're not—" Sumire descended into another fit of sobs and clung to Iroha's yukata. "I'm so sorry, Iroha-chan! Mashiro-chan!"

Iroha patted her head softly. Which one of them was the teacher again?

She grinned. "C'mon, what have you got to apologize for?"

"I'm supposed to be a wallflower! A mastermind shipping from the shadows. But now I'm cockblocking you guys, and... Oh, I'm the worst kind of trash!" Sumire cried.

"Maybe you should lower your voice a bit?" Iroha suggested.

"I-I think you're overreacting, Sumire-sensei. I mean, I'm not...uh..." Mashiro was glancing at me repeatedly.

Mashiro was clearly worried I told Sumire about her feelings for me. I hadn't, of course. Sumire was just convinced from the outset that both she and Iroha were in love with me. Without a shred of evidence, of course.

I say that, but it turned out that Mashiro really *did* have feelings for me. What about Iroha then? No way. Iroha wouldn't fall for me in a million years.

Wait, hold up a second. Since when was Mashiro here? She was speaking like she'd been here the whole time too.

"Aren't you supposed to be in writing hell, Mashiro?"

"Oh, um, I just came to see what all the fuss was about. I needed a break anyway."

"That Canary girl isn't gonna get mad at you?"

"She won't know. She'll be out in the forest playing with the wild birds at this time of day."

"What kind of hobby is that?"

On top of every other aspect of her, even Kanaria's daily routine sounded insane. Maybe that was what it took to be a superstar editor. She did seem kind of too old for a princess talking to the wildlife, though.

Unless.

Unless this was how she combated stress? That was entirely

possible. A woman with a track record like hers wouldn't go out singing with the birds just because something didn't go her way. She was like me, making her way through life with fine-tuned efficiency. This kind of anti-stress measure had to have some kind of deeper meaning to it. She knew how to enforce deadlines. She knew how to use people's talents. I could learn a lot from her. Maybe one day I'd be the one playing with birds in the forest.

Mashiro studied Sumire from the massage chair, her cool expression vibrating as she opened her mouth. "You're overreacting. Isn't the Ceremony of Knots just some weird superstitious thing? It won't mean anything if you don't take it seriously."

It was a fair point. I didn't know why Sumire was getting so up in arms about it when nothing in this life was guaranteed. Even the top experts in their field couldn't accurately predict the next advancements with more than 70% accuracy. Those who hit 80% were nothing short of prodigies.

The tendency to believe one particular outcome is guaranteed and putting all your eggs in one basket is how scammers make their money. Anyone who "guarantees" you anything should be treated with a healthy dose of suspicion.

"It might not just be superstition."

"Ozu?"

He was the last person I expected to say something like that. Every eye in the room focused on him now, the technological whiz kid whose entire skillset revolved around nothing but cold, hard logic. He was looking at his phone, apparently reading some sort of article.

"Nothing came up when I googled, so I hacked into the village office's database and looked through their records of these traditional events."

"They keep digital records in a backwater village like this?"

"Shut up and listen."

"Yes, sir..."

The smile on his face was too creepy to disobey. In fact, Ozu seemed to be getting more and more creepy as this trip went on. I wasn't confident I'd be able to stand up to him if I needed to.

"From what I found, the Ceremony of Knots is a sort of wedding procession."

"A wedding procession?"

"Yup. They used to have these evening processions of the people involved if the bride was marrying into a different village over the mountains or a castle or something. You'd get this whole line of adults walking across a dark path and carrying paper lanterns. You've heard of a fox's wedding, where it looks like there are all these lanterns floating in the dark?"

“Oh yeah, I have, now that you mention it.”

I looked into loads of urban legends and folklore in my research for *Koyagi*. Usually I rode on Makigai Namako-sensei's coattails, but there were times when I needed to come up with events and stuff by myself. That was where the internet came in handy.

“The Ceremony of Knots probably looks similar to that phenomenon. The man has to cleanse his body, while the woman wears a white kimono and a fox mask. They then walk in a line with the villagers to a tiny shrine deep in the mountains. Once they arrive, the villagers go back down to their homes while the couple spend the night there alone.”

“That's all? There's no special ceremony or whatever?”

“I didn't find anything about what exactly happens at the shrine apart from that the couple has to stay there.”

“That sounds fine. We'll just sleep till morning.”

“That's what I thought, but there's something I found which got me curious.” Ozu's eyes narrowed and he showed me his phone with a grave look on his face. There was a pie chart on the screen. A pie chart in a single color. “If you want to get technical, this ceremony has a 100% success rate. *Every* couple which goes through it ends up married with kids. It ties your fate together with an unbreakable rope. It's not just superstition; it's what the data shows. This is a significant sample size too. I've never seen anything like this.”

“You gotta be kidding...”

I was floored. As a man who valued efficiency above all else, I practically worshipped the very existence of math and statistics. Don't get me wrong. I knew about the whole correlation not equaling causation thing. For example, it could just be that the village put so much pressure on the couples who went through this ceremony to get married, that they felt they had no choice, especially in an old-fashioned place like this. It could be something like that causing this impossible figure, with no supernatural causes whatsoever.

“Even if it's got nothing to do with fate or whatever, there's some kind of force at work making sure these couples get married, no matter what.”

“That's what I'm gettin' at. Now d'you see why Sumire-sensei's losing her mind?”

“Do you see?! What am I supposed to do now? I'll never be able to face either of you again!”

“Sumire-chan-sensei...” Iroha mumbled.

Mashiro looked at her anxiously.

Now Sumire's reaction made sense. She thought we'd be fine just lying to her family and saying we'd get married, but once we went through the ceremony, we might actually end up tying the knot. She

was under the impression that Iroha and Mashiro, her beloved students, were in love with me. The guilt must have been all-consuming. Well, Mashiro *was* in love with me, but that was beside the point.

I didn't want to take part in any ceremony that was going to cause Sumire needless guilt. Nor did I want to end up married to her. I didn't mind signing a bit of paper if it meant she'd stick to her deadlines, but being forced into a traditional relationship with kids was something I wasn't prepared to accept.

I felt a gentle tug at my sleeve and looked down.

"Please don't take part in that ceremony."

It was Mashiro. Though she was staring at the floor, I could tell how strongly she felt. I could only grunt in response, not sure what to say when she laid her feelings bare to me like that. Cue my stomach getting pinched from the other side.

"Don't tell me you're gettin' all excited! For shame, Senpai!"

"I'm *not*!"

"Don't forget what you said about giving up your teenage years for—" Iroha began in my ear.

"I know!"

She was right. This wasn't the time to lose my composure. Don't worry, Iroha. Everything I did was for the Alliance. Everything I did was in the pursuit of the greatest and most efficient future possible.

"There's something that's been on my mind ever since we started this whole fake engagement."

Who cares about some superstitious ceremony? This "Ceremony of Knots" and its perfect success rate weren't the issue here. Now wasn't the time to be worrying about whether we'd be married against our will. This was about one thing, and one thing only:

Kageishi Sumire, and which future she'd choose for herself.

"A question, Sumire-sensei."

"What?" Sumire asked, her voice quivering. I felt bad for her, but I couldn't let up now.

"If you really feel bad for Iroha and Mashiro, then there's only one thing left for you to do. So why don't you do it?"

"Wh—B-Because..." The hot flush of her teary face faded into white, and she bit her lip.

"What are you talking about, Senpai?" Iroha blinked at me.

"It's simple. The only reason we're threatened by this ceremony is because we told Sumire-sensei's family that we're engaged. This is an issue of our own making. The fastest way out of it is for Sumire-sensei to accept responsibility and admit the truth."

"But then she'll have to marry someone she's never even met! That'll make things even worse than they are now!"

“That’s her problem. She shouldn’t have wasted the best part of her twenties obsessing over a fictional five-year-old. She just has to face reality now. That’s what it means to grow up.”

“Senpai, that’s way too harsh!” Iroha glared at me.

Sumire avoided my gaze, her lips pressed together in a tight line. I had no intention of taking back what I said. Even if she wasn’t going to look at me, I kept my eyes on Sumire’s, waiting for her response.

Speak. Tell us how you really feel.

The choice wasn’t between taking part in the ceremony or turning her back on it. The choice was whether she was going to continue on her path as a teacher, or become an illustrator. She must have realized it by now.

Was she willing to keep up this farce and hurt Mashiro (and, in her mind, Iroha)?

Or was she going to make the right choice by Mashiro (and, in her mind, Iroha) and according to her values as an educator?

I wasn’t going to let her get away without a clear response. If I needed to, I was ready to cut Murasaki Shikibu-sensei out of the Alliance for good.

“I...” Sumire’s arms trembled. Tears poured down her cheeks. I had long since learned that her tears were cheap, spilling over whenever she was even slightly perturbed. These tears were different. They came from a place deep within her. “No.”

That was her answer.

“I don’t want to get married. I don’t want to have to worry what other people think, day after day, with no time to draw.” There was no doubt in her words. This was what Murasaki Shikibu-sensei truly believed. They poured out along with her tears. “I want to draw. I want to keep drawing!”

This entire fake engagement seemed so silly, but now I realized how serious the situation was to her. If she got married to a man picked out by her family, it was likely he would report everything she did to her grandfather. She wouldn’t be able to keep drawing her doujinshi, because she risked her family finding out about them. Much as she tried to hide it by fooling around, the thought that her illustration career would end terrified her, and she had been battling with that fear the entire time.

“I’m sorry. I’m sorry, Iroha-chan. Mashiro-chan. I’m too selfish to call myself your teacher. But I want to keep drawing. No matter what, I want to keep drawing.”

This wasn’t our calm and collected teacher. Nor was it the over-the-top fool who lacked social skills. This was a pure young girl, who wanted nothing more than to follow her own dreams. This was who Murasaki Shikibu-sensei really was.

When I had scouted her for the Alliance, I spotted that exact same vulnerability in her. She'd been terrified that I might report her activities to the school and she'd have to stop drawing. She wouldn't be able to express herself. That was what scared her. That was why I promised to force her away from her family and set her free.

"Your answer has strengthened my resolve, Murasaki Shikibu-sensei."

"Huh?"

"I'm going to fulfill that promise I made to you. I'm going to free you from the bonds of your family, though it's happening earlier than I expected," I said, placing my hands on her shoulders. I then removed them, sunk to my knees, and bowed deeply. "I'm sorry for testing you. We can't afford to fail the mission I'm about to propose, so I needed to make sure you were ready to give it your all. But I'm sorry for making you cry."

"Aki..."

"Punch me. I know it's selfish, but it'll help me move on."

"Wh-What are you talking about?" Sumire asked, perplexed.

I looked up at her, sure that my eyes were alight with my determination.

Sumire looked away again and mumbled, "I couldn't hit you, and I don't need to. I can forgive you without doing something like that."

"Huh. Well, that's kinda a relief." I felt my tense facial muscles slacken as I realized I wasn't about to get punched in the face. I know I asked her to do it, but bracing myself against the pain was only human. If she wasn't going to punch me, then I guess I could just owe her—

"Take that!"

"GWOORGH!"

The fist of judgment came down on me from a different direction entirely. Wait, fist was the wrong word. It wasn't a slap either. It was a heavy, torturous, and sharp jab right in the pressure point at the base of my neck.

"Fuck's sake, Iroha!"

"Omigod, it totally worked! Sorry, Senpai! I just thought you looked a little stiff!"

"S-Since when do you know about pressure points?"

"It's called learning by observation. You're always going after them, right?"

"Why don't you learn some of my upstanding manners while you're at it?!"

Her elbow dug into that same spot, sending pain shooting through my shoulder.

Iroha bent down and whispered into my ear. "There, now you've

been punished for what you did to Sumire-chan-sensei. You don't gotta worry about a thing anymore, so go ahead and tell us your plan."

"Iroha..."

She knew what I was thinking? She knew me too well. So well that it pissed me off. Thanks, Iroha. (No, that last part wasn't sarcasm)

"All right, listen up. Iroha, we need your help for this plan. If you mess up, it's all over."

"Ooh! You need me?"

"Sure do."

Iroha let out a dramatic sigh. "Well, I guess I could pitch in just this once! But it's not like I *wanna* help you, you know!"

"Could you try and be a little more serious? Uh, but yeah. Thanks." I turned away from her and addressed everyone in the room as gravely as I could. "We're going to convince Kageishi Kou-san, the head of the Kageishi family, to set Murasaki Shikibu-sensei free. And I need every last one of you helping out."

"Finally gettin' off your ass and doing something, huh?"

"Yeah, I've made up my mind. I'm not gonna let Sumire-sensei's family stand in her way anymore."

"You make it sound so easy. Are you sure you're up to it?"

"I dunno."

"Also, Tsukinomori-san was looking like she wanted to kill you when Iroha was clinging to you."

"G-Great..."

Chapter 9: An Age-Old Tradition Has It In for Couples!

That night, the orange lights of a procession of paper lanterns could be seen illuminating the dark mountain path. From far off, it must have looked like floating balls of fire or the spirits of wandering ghosts. Only if you strained your ears to hear the faint crunch of earth, leaves, and branches would you be relieved to find those lights belonged to humans after all.

Those humans were the villagers of Kageishi Village. Clad in traditional kimono and masks, they followed after Kageishi Kou, the head of the group, without exchanging a single word. There, hidden beneath the large shadow of Kageishi Kou, was the main focus of the ceremony: the couple. One of them was, of course, me. The other, the woman next to me, was wearing an eerie outfit. The atmosphere and surrounding darkness amplified that eeriness.

She wore a fox mask over her face. It was white with a red smirk and eyes. The kind of mask you only saw at traditional Japanese events, in historic art museums, and in horror movies. This was matched with a white kimono, with long sleeves and a hem that trailed over the ground. You could only tell she was a woman by the subtle curves of the thick material over her tall body.

In the past, covering the bride up like this was probably to protect her identity and to avoid any ne'er-do-wells interfering with the event. Nowadays it amounted to nothing more than a gimmick; a gimmick which contributed to the unsettling air around the procession.

"Ah!"

"Sumire, a—Sensei? Are you okay?" I quickly reached out to support her as she tripped over a particularly thick tree root.

"I-I'm sorry." Though I couldn't see her face under the mask, she sounded bashful. "I'm not used to wearing shoes like these, so I'm a little unstable."

"Try and watch where you're putting your feet. It wouldn't do to have you show up covered in dirt. The mountain god would never forgive us!"

"He's right. It is the duty of a Kageishi woman to stay steady and resolute at all times, Sumire," Kou said.

"Y-Yes, grandfather," Sumire replied, dejected.

I held out my hand to her. "You can hold my hand until we get to

the shrine.”

“Thank you, Akiteru-kun.”

She took my hand. I could feel her warmth from her palm. It was soft, warm, and ever so slightly sweaty. She must have been nervous.

I couldn’t blame her. We were about to attempt to outwit not just the giant lumbering on in front of us, but also every last villager bringing up the rear.

We kept on walking hand-in-hand for a few more minutes till the procession came to a sudden halt. Kageishi Kou raised his lantern, illuminating the faint outline of a building in front of us. It was way bigger than I had expected for a shrine buried in these lesser-traveled mountains. Granted, it wasn’t as big as one of the shrines you’d find out in the city, but it was sizable nonetheless. Made from wood, parts of it looked to have been damaged by wind and rain. However, the fact that none of the wood was rotting showed that it underwent regular repairs. The zigzag strips of paper hanging over the entrance gave it a mystical feel.

“Take this, Akiteru-kun.”

“Yes, sir.” I carefully received the lantern Kou passed to me. Until now, we had been led by the lights of others, but once we entered the shrine, we’d be completely alone. That was what this lantern symbolized. I nodded gravely and led Sumire forward towards the shrine.

“Akiteru-kun.”

“Sir?” I turned around at the sound of Kou’s voice.

He grinned at me with his bearlike face, and gave me a hearty thumbs-up. “My granddaughter belongs to you now. GLHF!”

“Guh?”

I wouldn’t know how to pronounce “GLHF” if I saw it written on a page, but he somehow pulled it off perfectly. Before I could ask him to teach me the art, he pushed Sumire and me forward towards the shrine.

We’re finally at the rumored shrine...

If the claims about this place and its divine power were true, then my fate would be linked with this woman’s for the rest of eternity. I couldn’t think of anything worse. But the two of us were different. We knew it was a trick and that there was no supernatural force here. We continued towards the shrine, both our hands damp with sweat at this point.

Kou’s solemn voice thundered out behind us. “You two are to spend the night here together. You must not leave until the morning.”

“What would happen if we did leave?” I dared to ask.

“You shall become feed for the mountain dogs.”

He didn’t even hesitate. I was expecting him to say something

about a curse or evil spirits, but the words out of his mouth smacked of reality. If anything, that just made things scarier.

“Step forth. While some villagers will stay on watch further down the path, they will not be close enough to hear you. There will be no witnesses to what you do inside the shrine. Allow me to repeat myself. No matter what you do inside there, there will be no one to blame you, nor to get in your way, so rest assured.”

“Y-Yes, sir.” I could do nothing but nod, despite how uncomfortable it was for him to be reiterating that point.

“Good night, grandfather.” Sumire gathered up the ends of her white kimono and bowed.

“Good night.” Kou gave a satisfied nod.

We turned and stepped into the shrine, closing the sliding door shut behind us. Kou’s voice boomed outside.

“We’re going back down! Some of you stay to keep watch, okay?”

There were footsteps as the villagers moved away from the shrine. I opened the door a crack and peered out to see that the lanterns were already a good distance away. It was just me and Sumire now.

“We’re all alone, huh?”

“Yup.” She began to chuckle under the mask, her shoulders shaking. She was enjoying this way too much.

You’re way too talented.

“We got ‘em didn’t we, Senpai?” She flung her mask aside. Underneath that mask was not the cold-hearted beauty that was our pitiful math teacher, but Iroha, the smirk on her face as annoyingly smug as ever.

“Iroha and I will take part in the ceremony.”

It was a few hours before the ceremony. At my words, the room descended into chaos.

“You’re finally gonna marry her, huh?! Yes!” Ozu pumped his fist into the air.

“W-Wait, why? That’s a dumb idea. Unless... Aki, you don’t...” Mashiro was composed of equal parts rage and sadness.

“Sounds good. Oh, wait. Does that mean you like Iroha-chan? Oh my God, really?!” Sumire just sounded confused.

Everyone reacted just as I expected them to. Everyone except Iroha herself.

“W-Wait, Senpai. A-Are you saying—Huh. I guess you really do wanna marry me. Makes sense. I *am* super cute, after all!” Her words were fine, but she seemed kind of taken aback. Her eyes were darting all over the place, and her face was a little flushed. She was always teasing me about us getting together or whatever, so she probably

found it hard to take the topic seriously. It was kind of a relief, to be honest. It showed me she didn't have any intention of getting involved with me.

"Don't be dumb. Of course I don't wanna marry you. We both know that there's something fishy behind this whole Ceremony of Knots thing, right?"

It didn't matter what that something fishy was either. If we thought too hard about it and bottled out, we'd lose our chance here, and we wouldn't be able to free Sumire.

"When I said we were gonna 'take part' in the ceremony, I meant it more like we're gonna *make use* of it."

"What are you planning?" Sumire cocked her head at me anxiously.

I smiled. "We're gonna expose a Kageishi family secret."

"What do you mean?"

"The Kageishi has clung fast to its traditions for generations and forced its children to do the same. But what if the very people imposing these rules aren't what they seem? What if there's something more, something shady, behind the scenes? Some sort of weakness we can use?"

"Then I'd have no reason to follow the rules anymore."

"Right. You'd have an excuse not to, at least, which would be what you need to reject the tradition and set yourself free. That's why I want you to search the main Kageishi residence."

"Search?"

Everyone else in the room began to whisper to each other. I couldn't blame them; it was a suggestion bordering on criminal. That's why I chose Sumire.

"No one else can do this but you, Sumire-sensei. It makes the whole thing a little less illegal, since you're family. Almost the whole village will be out for the procession during the Ceremony of Knots, so the house should be empty."

"That's true. That's why you want me to switch places with Iroha-chan, right?"

"Yup. It's not like you can take part in the ceremony and search the house at the same time."

"C-Can't I switch with Sumire-sensei?" Mashiro spoke up timidly.

"I need someone who can pull off a convincing impression of her. Someone with acting ability. Otherwise no one's gonna fall for it."

"R-Right..."

"Wait, about this whole searching thing... What am I supposed to be looking for? I know my grandfather. I don't think he's the kind to just leave secret stuff lying around."

She was right. That man was built like a bear and had a voice that

sounded like a demon from hell. I doubted he had much to hide. But there was something I noticed these past few days. It was a small hope, but one I had no choice but to bet on.

"I noticed something when I spoke to your grandfather, Sumire-sensei. Something that didn't quite align with the values you told me about. If I'm right, it's the perfect place to strike. That's the secret I want you to look for."

"But what is this secret?"

Sumire, Iroha, Mashiro, and Ozu all stared at me, waiting for my next words with bated breath. I met each of their gazes in turn. And then I opened my mouth.

"Child porn."

Everyone stared at me, their movements and the expressions on their faces frozen.

"You're kidding, right, Senpai? I thought you were taking this seriously!"

Don't make it sound like I just told a joke which totally flopped!

"I *am* serious! You can't tell me that the entire Kageishi family, especially Kou, aren't a bunch of lolicons at least, if not pedophiles!"

"That makes it even worse! You really gonna deploy the whole of the Alliance just to prove that some guy's a lolicon? It's July, not April first!"

"Shut up! I keep telling you it's not a joke! We find something like child porn at the Kageishi residence, and they're finished, right? They'll have to let Sumire-sensei move on and start a new life as a character designer!"

"I mean, it's true, but...why do you even think this guy'll have that kinda stuff lying around in the first place, Senpai?"

"Three reasons." I held my fingers up. "First up was his tolerance towards student-teacher relationships."

The Kageishi family was so conservative in every other way. So why did its head not care about his granddaughter marrying a minor? He even said there were previous cases in their family of teachers marrying students.

"Uh, I'm not convinced. I mean, people used to get married when they were still kids in the past, right? What else have you got?"

"The second is the way he speaks."

"The way he speaks?"

"Usually his speech is pretty formal and proper right? But from time to time he slips in words that only teenagers use. That means he must be speaking to young people who use that kinda language, which is kind of fishy for an old dude who lives out in the middle of nowhere."

"That makes sense. Just being a teacher doesn't mean you'll pick

up on how the kids speak. Still kinda a weak argument, though." Iroha paused thoughtfully. "I mean, you could say he tries to talk like a teenager to build a rapport with his students or whatever."

"The last point is more of a deduction than anything else, but," I looked at Sumire, "this guy shares his DNA with Sumire-sensei. She's as perverted as they come, so it's only natural to think that he is too."

"Oh! I got you. The guy's totally a pedo!"

"Excuse me?!" Tears sprang up in Sumire's eyes.

"Think about it for a second," Iroha said. "You didn't just decide overnight you were going to be a perv, right? It's probably something in your DNA. I bet you every other member in your family is also hiding some kinda loli or shota fetish!"

"They can't be! You'd think I'd know. I grew up with those guys!"

"Sure, but Midori-san grew up with you, and she doesn't know about your sexual appetites."

"Ngh! You're right!"

Children often resemble their parents, sometimes in ways that aren't immediately obvious. In Sumire's case, her family were so strict and bound by tradition, that she hid anything that went against those traditions as best she could. That was how she developed her cool, beautiful exterior while burying her perversion deep inside.

Was Sumire the only one in her family putting on an act? What if every single member of her family was the same, hiding their true selves because of their traditions? What lay behind their masks? What if we crushed Sumire's need to follow the same rules that had been holding her back for so long?

"It's a gamble, I know. You might not find anything we can use. If you don't, we'll just have to come up with something else. We're gonna go all in with this chance, and if we screw up, we screw up together. What say you, Murasaki Shikibu-sensei?"

"Aki..." For a while, she stared at me in shock, her eyes wavering with indecision.

I wondered what was going through her head. Maybe nothing. Her lips were pressed together, and her hands curled tightly into fists. Eventually, and ever so slowly, her brow relaxed, and the light of determination flared in her gaze.

"I'll take a risk and go along with your plan. And I'm doing it all for my own future! Nobody else's!"

That was why Iroha and I were in the shrine this evening.

"They didn't suspect a thing."

"Course not!" Iroha grinned, flashing me a peace sign.

Everything went off without a hitch on our end, so Sumire and the

others should have had plenty of time to take care of searching the house. Iroha, my top actress, had played her role perfectly. She was a total star. Thanks to the kimono, her body was totally hidden, but on top of that she managed to recreate Sumire's speech and movements with flawless accuracy.

Our main issue had been the difference in their heights. Sumire was taller than Iroha, and I had needed to figure out how to recreate that. Luckily, we managed to come up with a solution.

"These shoes are impossible to walk in!" Iroha pulled up her kimono and kicked off the tall platform sandals she'd been wearing. They were among the stuff Sumire had brought for the beach. Her rationale for bringing them was something about scaring off surfer boys. I doubted they'd be any help with that, but they were definitely coming in handy now.

"Hiking sure is tough!"

"You just don't get enough exercise. I know it seems like a pain now, but you're not gonna be young forever. You should work out more."

"I don't wanna hear that from a guy like you who's glued to his desk all day every day! Don't come cryin' to me when you get yourself a slipped disc."

"That's why I read up on pressure points. Trust me, I got this health stuff covered."

"Great, if you're so fit, you can piggyback me down the mountain again."

"You wanna be babied again, huh?"

"S-Sorry, sir, I didn't mean anything by it, sir! I can't go through that humiliation again!"

As usual, our conversation devolved into nonsense. Nothing changed, even under the threat of the Ceremony of Knots. We bounced off each other, and the conversation was so effortless I never had to work my brain too hard. It was idiocy at its finest. That was why I was sure that, no matter what happened tonight, our fates couldn't be linked.

Or so I thought.

Iroha started to make her way further into the shrine. "This thing is way too heavy. I'm gonna pull it off and get some sl—"

"Iroha? Why're you freezing u...p?" I followed after her. And then I spotted what it was that stopped her in her tracks.

The entire plan had gone off without a hitch so far.

In front of us was a bigger wrench in the works than I could ever have imagined. I opened my mouth, but no words came out.

The space in front of us was bathed in a peach-pink, lurid light. Some weird, new-agey music started to play as a silver ball hung and

rotated from the ceiling. The ball caught and reflected the pink light, giving the entire room a sleazy makeover. Enshrined in the room's center was a brand new double bed. There was a tissue box on the pillow. Inside it were four square packets which read, "0.01 millimeters." Hopefully they were mints or something.

Anyway, I think you're smart enough to get the picture without me having to go into any more detail. I was done keeping my mouth shut too.

"What is this, a love hotel?"

That was exactly what it looked like from every angle. What was a love hotel doing inside a traditional shrine in the mountains? It wasn't just me who thought that was crazy, right?

"Senpai, check this out! All of these condoms have holes in them!"

"Okay, now that's beyond a joke! And what are you doing checking them the second you walk in here?!"

"W-Well, it's important to check the condition of your contraception! N-Not that I thought we were gonna use it!"

"If you're so embarrassed about it, you shouldn't have touched them in the first place!" I looked at them. "Hey, you're right. All the packets have holes in them. Like they've been stabbed with a toothpick or a needle or something."

I came in here expecting something, but this really took the cake (and ate it too).

The Ceremony of Knots had a one hundred percent rate of couples getting together, so I knew there had to be some kind of trick behind it. That was why I was confident enough to use the ceremony as part of the plan. I was expecting something, so we could be prepared to fight whatever it was when we got here. Only, I wasn't expecting it to be something so...extreme. It was basically telling us to copulate. I say "telling," I mean "shouting from the rooftops."

The lack of subtlety was enough to give me a headache...and maybe turn me on just a little bit. Wait, no! Scurry back to thy cave, Satan!

"Okay, let's just calm down a second. I'm gonna go and sit over there."

"All right..."

I made my way to the other side of the bed. Iroha was unusually quiet. She was probably embarrassed. There wasn't much space in this shrine to start with, and the bed took up most of it. Walking here was hard.

"Wh-What?!"

"Huh? Whoa!"

I got onto the bed to go over to the other side, only to find that the mattress was way softer and fluffier than it looked. I had no idea

beds could be this bouncy. It had to be twice as springy as my bed at home. The second I put my foot on there, I fell forward. I reached out my hands on reflex, and they caught Iroha's shoulder.

The bed squeaked audibly as my back crashed into it. The softness was like a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it made me trip, but on the other, its sweet, sweet softness prevented any pain.

"Ngh! Sorry, Iroha. I just—Gah!" I forced my eyes open. What I saw caused me to squeal.

Iroha's face was right there. Close enough for me to feel her breath. The traditional scent used for her kimono mingled with the modern sweetness of her shampoo. Through my clothes, I could feel her heat where our bodies were pressed together, like she was my personal hot-water bottle. Though she was lying on top of me, her weight on me wasn't enough to be unpleasant. Instead, it was comforting.

"Um... Senpai?"

"S-Sorry. I didn't mean to, uh... Wait, I'll fix it!" I scrambled to get out from underneath her, but as I did, her weight seemed to amplify on top of me.

"H-Hey, Iroha?"

"Senpai. Don't tell me you're getting flustered?"

"Wh—"

Iroha's face was pressed against my chest. She put her ear to it, looking up at me with a soft, questioning gaze.

Don't look at me like that! Of course I'm flustered! This is nerve-racking!

I knew she couldn't hear my thoughts, but the thumping of my heart seemed to answer her for me.

"Can I ask you something?"

"Sure, but get off me first, or I—"

I'm going to get excited.

I couldn't tell her that, so I cut myself off.

Iroha was clinging to my clothes, letting more of her weight press against me. Her face was still there, right against my chest. I couldn't remember looking at her from such a close distance before. Whenever she teased me, it seemed to come from behind me. I'd never seen the expression on her face when she held on to me like this.

"You only came up here with me to carry out the plan. Did you ever think, for even a second, that you might not mind going through the ceremony with me?"

I didn't know how to respond when she looked at me like that. Was that how she always looked when she held me? Or was it just because of the atmosphere of the room?

When she teased and bullied, she always had this smirk on her

face. I thought that was the face she made when she was enjoying the other party's confusion. Right now, the look on her face reminded me of how Mashiro had looked at me when we went to that restaurant.

"I don't believe in all the superstitious stuff. But you chose to take part in this ceremony with me, even after knowing that the couples involved are guaranteed to end up together. Isn't that, like, an indirect way of saying you like me?"

"What about you?" I managed to choke out, still unable to hold down the thumping of my heart. Asking her a question in return avoided me having to answer hers. It was a cowardly move.



I knew it was cowardly, but I didn't have the courage to do anything else.

"I don't mind going through this with you," she murmured.

"Huh?"

She was usually so loud and obnoxious. Why was she suddenly whispering like that? Her voice sounded frail somehow. Delicate.

"If I didn't want to, I wouldn't have gone along with your plan."

"Iroha..."

What did she mean by that?

Does Iroha like me?

That question had been crossing my mind a lot lately. I always felt like her incessant teasing was proof that she didn't, but then I remembered how abusive Mashiro used to get with me, and *she* liked me. Even if Iroha didn't act like she liked me, maybe she did. Maybe something like that wasn't confined to the realm of romantic comedies after all. And if she did...

Then what?

I wish my heart would just slow down for a second!

It wouldn't stop pounding and roaring in my ears. It was making it hard to get things straight in my head.

Dammit. Why was I getting so flustered about everything anyway? Even if Iroha did like me, she wasn't my type at all. She was hyper, loud, and just plain annoying. Despite all that, she never turned her back on me, no matter how unpleasant my life choices might have seemed to other people.

Why was this all coming to the forefront at a time like this? In a steamy room with no escape, where the two of us were completely alone? When our bodies were pressed together and it was hard to tell whose breath and whose heartbeat was whose? Why?

Why are you looking at me so sweetly? Why are you blushing right up to your ears?

"What if I said I wanted to let the magic of the ceremony take over?" Iroha asked bashfully. Nothing in her expression irritated me as it usually would. It was just...sweet. It was like a mesmerizing shot of sugary temptation, right to my heart. It dried out my mouth and lodged a lump in my throat.

Dawn was still a long way off.

Epilogue: Sumire and Mashiro

“I really suck at being a teacher...”

It was the middle of the night. The scene was the Kageishi residence’s courtyard, a traditional Japanese garden. I, Kageishi Sumire, sighed as I sat on the moonlit porch, staring at the light of the line of lanterns moving up the mountain path in the distance.

I wonder how many times I’d sighed since becoming an adult. When I was still a student, I only sighed when I was blown away by a fantastic piece of art featuring my favorite ship and it was too much to handle. I couldn’t remember when sighing became something that equated depression for me.

Aki’s question really hit home. Did I want to be a teacher, or did I want to be an illustrator? He made me pick there, on the spot. He was right that I needed to make a decision, which was why I found myself unable to argue.

I’d spent my whole life up until that point running away. I suppressed what I really wanted to do and—no, I *pretended* to suppress my true passions but just ended up following them in secret instead, which was cowardly.

I lied to a ton of people, and I betrayed my own feelings. Only when a bunch of kids almost ten years younger than me—my students—came to save me did I ever try to move forward. There were “bad teachers,” and then there was me.

I couldn’t let these negative feelings hold me back right now. That would just make me even more useless than I already was. I had to make full use of the opportunity Aki and Iroha-chan had given me.

Growing up, I was always taught to be a good little girl. To get better grades than anyone else, to be more polite than others, and to follow a straighter path than they did. And why shouldn’t I? Even if it felt restrictive, those were all good qualities, and so I had no right to argue.

I couldn’t believe that my grandfather and other relatives were hiding secrets like I was. They were too strict for that. Aki was right, though. If they did, they couldn’t argue with me taking hold of my own future. In fact, I would even be able to stand up to them, and ask how they had the right to be so strict with me when they couldn’t hold themselves to their own standards.

It never occurred to me that I might end up in a position like that.

I realized Aki was always challenging my perspective on things ever since he invited me to join the Alliance. He broke down every rigid idea I had and every limit I decided to place on myself without batting an eyelid.

“Maybe that’s why I feel so at ease around him.”

I only ever used to be Murasaki Shikibu-sensei around a very select few. They were all people involved with my doujinshi circle, such as the girls who helped out at the booths. Nowadays, I was happy being Murasaki Shikibu-sensei among the Alliance members, including Iroha-chan and Mashiro-chan too. If those two hadn’t fallen for him...

“Maybe I could’ve gotten married to him and been happy.”

I was so taken in by his chivalry that I could well imagine that scenario. I had no intention of getting married at all, of course. I was happier being the houseplant that blended into the background. I didn’t want to get in the way of the love between two young people.

“Do you...like Aki, Sumire-sensei?” Mashiro-chan asked me.

“No. Well, I don’t dislike him. I just don’t like to ship myself with anyone.” I shook my head, not missing the tone of jealousy in her question.

“Oh. Good.”

She really didn’t need to worry as much as she did, though I guess that was all part of Mashiro-chan’s charm.

Wait.

“Mashiro-chan?! What are you doing here?!”

“I thought I’d help you find some evidence.”

As though summoned by my thoughts, Tsukinomori Mashiro-chan stepped out from behind the thick bushes of the courtyard. She wasn’t trying to hide the pout on her face, but it just made her look all the cuter with those leaves caught in her silvery-blond hair.

“I want to help you finish up Aki’s mission and then I’m going to the shrine. I don’t like the idea of him and Iroha-chan being alone up there...”

“Mashiro-chan... Right. It’s my fault for getting you wrapped up in this mess. I’m sorry.”

“No, it’s not your fault.” There was still a sharpness to Mashiro-chan’s voice as she took her shoes off and joined me on the porch.

I happened to glance at her right hand. Her fingertips were ever so slightly swollen and red.

“Your hand...”

“Huh? Oh. Don’t worry about it. I’ve just been typing too much.”

Aki and the others told me Mashiro-chan happened to come to the village with her editor to help her make some deadlines. The news surprised me; I knew she was writing a novel, but I didn’t know she was good enough to get herself an editor.

I could tell by the blisters on her hands that this wasn't some cringey teenage fanfiction she was writing; she was producing something for the real market.

"Does your editor know you're here? I thought you were close to the deadline."

"I snuck out through the window. Canary-san won't come to check on me unless I call her, so I don't think she'll know I'm gone."

"The window, huh? I never thought of that!"

"I think it's too late for you, Shikibu. Your editor needs to trust you first."

"I guess! I never keep deadlines, so Aki's always keeping too close an eye—Wait, what?" I stopped laughing. Was it just my imagination, or...

"I-I'm sorry!" Mashiro-chan suddenly spoke up. "I-I meant to call you Sumire-sensei, but—"

"O-Oh, don't worry about it. I wanna be one of those teachers who's also your friend!"

We both reacted awkwardly, and I suddenly realized I didn't often get the chance to speak to Mashiro-chan alone like this. The first time was when she had transferred to the school, and after that it had only been when we had the occasional student-teacher meeting. We only spoke about the regular stuff then too, like what her previous school or lifestyle had been like.

I had no idea about her likes and dislikes. What made her smile, or what made her angry. I didn't know what to talk to her about now. Last week's anime? My current favorite yaoi ship? Those topics were probably a little *too* familiar...

As the two of us searched the huge, traditional hall of the Kageishi residence, I tried desperately to come up with a good topic of conversation. I knew this wasn't really the time for a lighthearted chat, but doing this in silence was just too awkward. I was still struggling to come up with something when Mashiro-chan suddenly took the initiative.

"You're really mature, Sumire-sensei."

"Huh? Well, maybe by some standards. I'd like to think I'm mature, anyway."

"Then, I wanted to ask you something." Mashiro-chan said, opening up and rummaging through the closet. "My editor said something really confusing. I don't get it, but I've been trying to work it out for ages and I can't stop thinking about it."

"Ooh, is it something lewd? How dare your editor corrupt my pure little Mashiro-chan!"

"Shikibu."

"Sorry, ma'am. I got overexcited."

A wave of *déjà vu* suddenly washed over me.

Huh?

“My editor said if the Alliance keeps taking instead of giving, it’s going to crack. What did she mean?”

“The Alliance?”

It was a more serious topic of conversation than I had expected. That just meant I had to think things through seriously myself.

“Well, relationships like that are about give and take. If a relationship isn’t balanced in how much each party gives and gains, it’s going to break eventually. I guess that’s what your editor was getting at.”

“Give and take...”

“I think it might be kind of tough for teenagers to understand that sort of thing.”

“So do you have a give-and-take relationship with the Alliance?”

“I guess. Ooboshi-kun—well, Aki, made me a promise.”

He promised that he would get me a position at Honeyplace Works, one of the most competitive enterprises out there, and then he’d show my family that I wasn’t bound by their traditions anymore. My existence was one of the reasons he had to aim for us to join that company. I knew it wasn’t just about me, of course. But he was the one who had taken me by the hand and pulled me closer to my dream when I’d been trapped in a maelstrom of fear.

“What if the relationship wasn’t give and take anymore, then?” Mashiro-chan asked, cutting off my reminiscence.

“What?”

“Like, what if we find something now and manage to convince your grandfather to let you become an illustrator? What could the Alliance offer you then?”

“W-Well...” I fell silent. Her question was simple, but it pierced through me like a knife.

The 05th Floor Alliance was a loose gathering of people set up by a single high schooler. Not to brag, but I knew that if I quit being a teacher and became a freelance artist, I’d be overwhelmed with clients. If I was honest, there might not be anything the Alliance could offer me after that.

There was something else that concerned me more than that, though.

“Why do you ask, Mashiro-chan? Is there something on your mind?”

She sounded like she was the one involved in the Alliance. Like she was the one worried that she would stand to lose out in the future. I studied her carefully, but she stayed silent. She put a hand to her chest, and I could hear her breathing quicken slightly, as though she

were anxious.

“I’m scared,” she said. “I’m scared of losing my connection to the Alliance. I know Aki will keep doing his best to include us, even if it damages the Alliance, though, because he’s amazingly kindhearted...”

“Mashiro-ch—”

“If you’re set free, the Alliance could be in trouble. It’ll be in danger of losing Murasaki Shikibu-sensei, its sole illustrator. But I know Aki will think that’s for the better. If it’ll lead to its members’ happiness, he’ll even disband the Alliance. That’s what I figure, from what I know about him.”

“Mashiro-chan...”

She knew him well, though I guess she *was* his cousin and fake girlfriend. She learned a lot about him ever since she transferred to our school. But even then, she spoke like she knew him much better than she should.

“That’s why I’m scared. If the Alliance disbands, I’ll lose my connection to Aki. I couldn’t bear it.”

“W-Wait, Mashiro-chan. What do you mean? You’re not even—”

“I know. Tsukinomori Mashiro isn’t in the Alliance. I have another name, though, and that person *is* a member.”

Mashiro’s face was pale with fear for her future. She looked straight into my eyes, as though doing her best to work past that terror. Crushed by the weight of her gaze, I could do nothing but stare back at her and listen to her confession.

“My other name is...Makigai Namako.”



Afterword

Hello, everyone! I'm mikawaghost! Since this volume of *My Friend's Little Sister Has It In for Me* (or ImoUza for short) has a horror theme behind it, I thought I'd share a terrifying story with you all. One that really happened.

As you readers already know, ImoUza is about a group of high schoolers who spend their youths doing romantic, funny, and sometimes pretty creative things. I tried to make the high school girl characters as lifelike as possible (which served to give some real depth to the story) and to make the story strangely realistic, despite it being a work of fiction. But if I wanted to have these characters be just like real, modern-day high schoolers, there was one topic I couldn't shy away from:

Bubble tea.

I'm writing this afterword in October 2019, a time when bubble tea is hugely popular. It would be sloppy of me to write a story about ordinary high school girls and *not* mention bubble tea.

So, my editor and I made for a certain bubble tea store in Roppongi, to drink on the publisher's dime (whether they'd actually cover the costs was a different matter, since I never checked, but whatever). It was delicious, and I could see why it was so popular. They say seeing is believing, and the naysayers also say it's a drink you buy only to get more Instagram followers, but I was surprised to find it tasted good. It looked cute too.

After my first taste of bubble tea, I finally returned to my desk and typed out a chapter title.

Chapter 2: My Homeroom Teacher has a Thing for Me and Bobble Tea

What an impressive title, I thought.

It was a title I couldn't have come up with if I had never tried bubble tea, and all my knowledge of it came from the odd Twitter post. I began to write, feeling a fiery passion burning in my eyes as I drew on my real-life experiences. I had made it. I was qualified to write about bubble tea. Finally, my manuscript was done.

"This is how you write high schoolers! This is how you write a romantic comedy set in the modern age!"

I thrust my manuscript at my editor, "smug" written all over my face. My editor returned the manuscript a few days later with the

following comment:

“You know it’s ‘bubble tea’ and not ‘bobble tea,’ right?”

I stared.

“I see, so you’re trying to write about a trend without knowing the first thing about it, even though you looked so smug. It’s super obvious how hard you’re trying too! What, you thought that one serving of bubble tea meant you’d tapped into the mind of every high school girl out there? Pfft.”

“Don’t think I’m gonna let this slide just because you’re trying to sound like Iroha right now, dumbass! She gets away with being annoying because she’s cute, but you’re *just* annoying!”

(I may be exaggerating these messages a bit. I was actually way more polite than this. I guess my editor didn’t say all of that exactly either, but that was how it came across.)

Right now, mistaking “bubble” for “bobble” makes for a funny story, but back then I was so embarrassed and my face was so red that I yelled and rolled all over the floor that my Roomba only just cleaned.

How’s that for a scary story?

Just remember, this time I was the one who messed up with the current lingo, but next time it might be you. Then you will know the full extent of my embarrassment.

Time for the thanks.

First, to my illustrator tomari-sensei. I can’t thank you enough for the fantastic pictures you drew for this volume! Lately, my editor and I have been using the term Godmari for when you send us another one of your godlike pictures (It’s a combination of “godlike” and “tomari-sensei”). I look forward to working with you in the future, if you’re up for it too!

To my editor, Nuru-san. To everyone at GA Bunko’s editorial department. To everyone in the sales department. To the staff in the stores that are so excited to sell my work, and to everyone who was involved in this book’s publishing. Thank you so much!

Thank you to everyone who bought and/or read this book! I’m really grateful!

A special drama CD will be bundled with volume 4 in Japan. Things are starting to get really exciting! I hope you’ll continue to support ImoUza in the future!

That’s all from me,
mikawaghost

My Friend's
Little Sister
Has It **IN** for Me!

vol. **3**

Author:
mikawaghost

Illustration:
tomari

© tomari





"I'M
REALLY
SORRY."

"UH, UM...
HOW ABOUT
YOU JUST
MAKE SURE
YOU DON'T
LOOK
DOWN?"

© tomari



APPARENTLY,
SOME OF US
HAVE FOUND
LOVE AND
LIKE TO
FLAUNT IT.

SNOOZE...

© tomari



MOVE IT,
LOSERS! MURASAKI
SHIKIBU-SENSEI
COMING THROUGH!

"C'MON!
LEMME
LISTEN
TOO!"

"NO. AND STOP
GRABBING THE
CORD, IDIOT!"

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Table of Contents

Cover

Characters

Recap

Prologue

Chapter 1: My Friend's Little Sister Wants to Spook Me!

Chapter 2: My Homeroom Teacher Has a Thing for Me and Bubble Tea

Interlude: Iroha and Mashiro on the Case

Chapter 3: My Homeroom Teacher's Boobs Have It In for Me

Chapter 4: My Teacher's Little Sister Wants to Kill Me!

Chapter 5: The Beach Has It In for Our Timely Arrival

Chapter 6: My Teacher's Grandfather Is... Uh...

Chapter 7: The Inn's Ghosts Have It In for the Guests

Interlude: Mashiro and Canary

Chapter 8: My Teacher Has It In for Rationality

Chapter 9: An Age-Old Tradition Has It In for Couples!

Epilogue: Sumire and Mashiro

Afterword

Color Illustrations

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by mikawaghost

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